Remaking of an Age

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Remaking of an Age

by Anonymous

Summary

The Heart of the Void and the Heart of the Light have made a pact to defeat their one true enemy.

Retrieve her scattered shards.

Wake her children and the priestess.

But most importantly, *Save the Hollow Knight*.

Discontinued as of 10/24/2020, Look for the remake after November!

Notes

hi welcome to remaking of an age, im mae, and i don't really know how to write so pls roast me to death if you catch any mistakes (tho my amazing beta readers usually have me covered in that regard)

anyways, i hope u enjoy my silly bug fic!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Ghost 01 // Intro

When they first awoke, deep within the heart of the abyss, they remembered being surrounded by voices...

quiet, happy, safe, familiar, you, us, you, us, home

They were filled with the sensation of being encompassed by shadows. Within the darkness, they could feel the others, none of them with form, but individual nonetheless. Even without physical bodies to differentiate themselves from one another, they knew who they were- *smallest, youngest, littlest, newest, beloved* -and were content.

The heart of the void had been their home. The shadows had been born within the stone egg, its walls protecting them. Their siblings had been with them since the very beginning, and that was how they had all expected it to stay.

Until they were discovered by the light, and awoken from their timeless slumber by the shining Idol of Hallownest.

As soon as the egg was cracked open, one by one, their kin had been pulled away from the void, and the formerly meaningless notion of time now brought fear to the rest of them as the restless spirits wondered which of them would be stolen next. Their numbers were once great, a flourishing well of sleeping darkness, but now they dwindled close to nothing.

So many had been taken by the time the final sacrifice was created; a perfect vessel to seal away the infection forever.

Though try as they might, not even the King's chosen knight was meant to be eternal.

Being the youngest, they woke last, not knowing why they were pressed into such a form.

That didn't mean they didn't understand what it meant after crawling out from beneath the pile of discarded shells of their kin. More were falling from above, and they could hear the void itself mourning the loss of its children.

They had seen them, the one who came before them, surrounded by a halo of light. A shape so similar and yet different all at once.

Then, they saw the pale one and watched the doors close forever, sleep enveloping them as they were blanketed in a familiar- but horribly empty -darkness.

Now, the warmth of the abyss was far away. Ghost- Hornet had called them that, first out of trepidation, and then out of endearment -was the perfect successor. The cries of their siblings had been silenced the moment they had ended their elder's suffering and taken the mantle of Pure's sacrifice; the Old Light filling their once empty shell with blinding, raging fire.

Shadows and chains were the only things to keep them company within the heart of the black egg. That, and...

Hornet, the Gendered Child of the Beast and the Pale King, laid unmoving across the room from where their body was restrained. Her needle was embedded in the ground mere inches away, its normally vibrant, glimmering thread now dulled without the fire of its owner to brighten it.

Some time ago, she'd admitted to being similar to them in a way. Due to their shared heritage, even a small piece of darkness was enough for them to feel how they gravitated towards her, the void crying out for unity. The Pale King was not so powerful as to create life from thin air, but the shells that they and the rest of their kin wore had been crafted by the wyrm-incarnate himself.

It might have been the loneliness talking then, but to Ghost, even such a small measure of relation was enough of a reason to call her their *sister*.

Had they ever heard her among the throng of voices that filled the abyss? Was it possible that they'd known each other once?

Even if it was true, nothingness was their future now.

Hollow beings created out of pure darkness, forced to hold a light that was perhaps as old as them and yet more powerful than anyone ever thought possible.

Facing the rest of their kin's deteriorated echoes within the abyss had given Ghost a new will to see their quest to the end. Uniting the heart of the void with themselves had not been easy, but in the end, it was only with the strength of the shadows that they were able to succeed.

Yet, it was a success that ended with them replacing Pure, their sacrifice a reminder of the arrogance that borne the plague they had been used to contain.

The Pale King had thought his vessels to be empty, emotionless, without individual thought or purpose.

He had never considered the idea that those remaining within the abyss would respond to their lost sibling's cries of pain.

Even as Pure took the infection into themselves, remaining silent in the face of the kingdom's new light, the void's children screamed in unison as their agony was projected to them all.

burning, burning! fire, light, too much! hurts! hurts! pain, pain, ***PAIN*** *!*

The chosen vessel had been calling for help ever since the day the Old Light was sealed inside of them, its blazing luminescence tearing their body apart from the inside.

It was never truly Ghost's burden or their responsibility to save them, but the rest of the shadows had grown afraid of the light. They wanted their family back.

However, in the end, the best they could do was to give their older sibling a swift and merciful death.

Ghost had raged tirelessly to escape the confines that the Pale King had subjected their kind to, and yet from the moment they first crawled out of the darkness, their fate had been sealed.

In those moments, with nothing but themselves in their new prison, they felt true hatred.

They alternated between false-sleep and agonizing wakefulness, and in between, they would rage against everything in their tiny world.

They hated the Pale King, they hated how his pride had led to the downfall of so many.

They hated how his need to be the unchallenged ruler of all bugs involved stealing away thousands of their siblings from their formerly secure home and thrusting them into an unforgiving world where so many of them perished.

They hated how even through all their travels across Hallownest, no matter where they went, there was someone in pain, someone who had experienced tragedy, someone whose future had been struck to pieces because of the wyrm's arrogant plan.

They hated the fact that despite their journey to free their sibling from being trapped in eternal agony, they had knowingly fulfilled the king's one wish.

He didn't deserve them! All that love, all that praise and worship. A god? No more than an impostor riding on the sacrifices of others to gain little except than a throne of broken promises and admiration!

The weight of the king's brand- the mark they had taken from the depths of the dead wyrm's corpse, seared into their chest -only made them fight harder, the four-pronged symbol reminding them of how they played right into the wyrm's plans.

Then, out of the silence, a voice echoed alongside their own, screams of anger rattling their head where they stood.

'...USURPER...TRAITOR...FALSE ONE...'

Cease!

They might not have been able to speak physically, but this was *their* mind. Not even the king could silence their own thoughts.

‘...THE TINY SHADOW...IT SPEAKS TO THE LIGHT IT HAS IMPRISONED...THINKS IT CAN CONTROL HER...’

The Old Light? Even when trapped in the heart of the void, you persist.

Another scream shook their body. The image of a moth-like being of impressive stature flashed behind their eyes.

‘...THERE IS NO OLD LIGHT, ONLY HER, ONLY THE DAWN...YOUR PALE LIGHT...HE WAS A MERE FLICKER IN THE DARK COMPARED TO HER... OUR ENEMY’S SPAWN WILL FAIL...JUST LIKE THE OTHER ONE...’

A burst of shadow and soul erupted from their body as they responded to the Light’s taunting, the spell doing nothing but causing the chains surrounding them to tremble slightly.

Stop your slander! Their sacrifice might not have held in the end, but I will not falter. Your light cannot pierce the unified force of void.

For a few moments, silence reigned in the black egg. Ghost considered the revelation of the Light being able to communicate with them. It had been so long since they trapped the heart of the infection within their hollowed body, and they hadn’t communicated with another being since leaving the abyss.

‘...THE SHADOW THINKS ITSELF STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD HER... YET THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE...’

Ghost waited as the Light twisted and hummed within her confines. They could feel her searching, sifting through their very being, before-

‘...SHE UNDERSTANDS NOW...’ Their curiosity got the better of them.

What do you understand?

‘...SMALL BEING...SMALLER THAN ITS PREDECESSOR... SUCH A MINUSCULE CREATURE, YET IT SEEKS TO DEFY EVERYTHING FOR THE SAKE OF ITS KIN...LIGHT AND DARK HAVE EXISTED TOGETHER SINCE THE BEGINNING...YOU MAY HOLD FOR NOW, BUT SHE WILL REGAIN HER STRENGTH...THE LIGHT WILL RETURN...THE DAWN WILL ALWAYS RISE AGAINST THE USURPER...’

If you think me another pawn of the wyrm then you are mistaken, Light! I have never and will never serve the lying king.

‘...YOU DO NOT FIGHT FOR THE PALE ONE’S CAUSE, TINY SHADOW...’ The Light paused, as though she was considering her own words. ‘...PERHAPS YOU AND HER MAY SHARE A COMMON GOAL...’ They didn’t know how to feel about that.

On one hand, the final culmination of their efforts had been to replace their sibling as the vessel to contain the infection, but deep down, they thought of the Pale King, and how none of their kin would have suffered had it not been for his arrogance.

‘...FOR YOU, LITTLE ONE, SHE HAS AN OFFER...’

Chapter 2: Hornet 01

Chapter Summary

Hornet wakes up to unfamiliar surroundings.

Chapter Notes

Still not ready for regular updates, sorry! But here's some more stuff to let you all know that I haven't abandoned this project!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before she even stepped foot into the black egg, Hornet knew what fate might befall her in its abyssal walls. It was constructed to drain those who were not of the same construction as her siblings, and although she may have shared but a piece of their power, she was not a true vessel such as they.

If she entered, there was little chance that she'd come back out.

Even the space outside of the vault itself was heavy with infected air. The air in the crossroads hung over her with its thick, oppressive atmosphere. She could smell the sickly sweetness of the infection, its cloying scent stuck to her cloak and weighed her down in more ways than one. Ever since she'd ascended from the caverns below she felt drained. Her body protested movement as lethargy slowly consumed her.

The Ghost of Hallownest entered the egg some time ago, and now all she was left to do was to wait for an opening. However, with how things were progressing outside, Hornet worried if she would have enough energy to assist them when the time came. She'd claimed herself the protector of the ruins. It was her duty to do everything in her power to contribute to their continued existence, even if that meant giving her life for them.

Then the Hollow Knight's shrieks of pain rang out from that dark place and Hornet knew she had to act.

As she sped through the blackness of the vault's interior, she struggled not to let her pace slow or falter, even as her limbs pulled her down with each stride. At the end of the seemingly endless hallway, she could see Ghost falling to the ground, the larger knight's nail poised to strike them down.

In that moment- her mind and body both fighting against her -instinct took control when an overwhelming flood of protectiveness surged through her. Lunging forward, the desperate need to *protect small one!* screamed out from someplace deep inside her. With a single savage throw, her needle was embedded in the Hollow Knight's mask, forcing it back and stunning it long enough for her to wrap her thread around its body in an attempt to restrain it.

Only a few moments passed since then and already she was struggling to keep the taller being from moving. Glancing back, she saw Ghost regain their footing and charge forward. Would this be it? Would they finally achieve what their birth cursed sibling failed to do? As her vision swam, flecks of dark began to obscure her sight. Hornet watched as they struck the knight again and again with their nail. She wanted to reach out, to tell them that there was another way-

Before she could even think to move, the Hollow one broke free from her thread, and Hornet knew no more.

Since that fateful battle, time became meaningless. Hornet knew she wasn't dead. She could feel the world around her, although her senses long since dulled as it remained unchanging. How she'd survived, she didn't know.

If- somehow -she actually *was* dead and this was the afterlife, then it was the most boring thing she'd ever experienced. With the energy completely drained from her form, she was useless and immobile. Hornet accepted the fact that in the vast expanse of shadow, she would be bound forever. An eternity spent to give her life for her kingdom.

It was with that sentiment that she held on, until an unfamiliar voice broke through the stasis, cutting through the dark around her like a lance.

' *...Your story isn't over yet, Child of the Beast!'*

Hornet was overwhelmed by what felt like a million white-hot fires erupting inside her shell at once. Everything was too much, and without thinking about it, she began to scream until her voice itself burned out. The pain was overwhelming, all-encompassing, and by the time she thought she would surely die- it stopped.

A blinding light spilled out from behind her eyes and Hornet collapsed, her chest heaving with agony as the world re-made itself around her.

Somewhere nearby, she could hear the sound of the winds howling over the cliffs.

For a while, Hornet refused to move. She could feel her body recovering from the unnatural, searing onslaught as soon as she woke, but for the moment, she only wanted to be still until everything properly aligned itself. Once the final remnants of the blaze fled from her frame, she opened her eyes at last, shaking away the last few spots lingering in her vision.

This...was not the black egg vault.

Her surroundings may have been dull, but they weren't pitch black or made of void like her previous prison. In fact, the closer she looked, the more familiar they seemed to be. Casting a glance over her shoulder, the dimly lit town of Dirtmouth shone out from beneath the haze, and if she lifted her gaze up, she could spy the faint pink glow of the crystalline peak shining from above.

Hornet staggered to her feet and looked around, the familiar yet unfamiliar territory made her uneasy, the urge to have a weapon securely held in her hand pulled at the back of her mind. Attempting to step forward was met with disastrous results as she tripped over *something* lying in front of her. Catching herself before her face could meet the ground once again, she spun around to see what caused her to stumble.

With a gasp, she crawled towards the figure and tried to roll them over. Upon touching their shoulder, a jolt traveled up her arm, surprising her briefly. Shaking off the discomfort, she realized that her suspicions were confirmed. It was Ghost. Though their chest rose and fell slowly, Hornet knew that their kind had no need to breathe. They must have suffered a similar ordeal such as she.

Taking in their appearance, she realized that they'd actually grown. Her hands moved on their own to trace her sibling's now elongated horns. Their cloak too, was no longer as long as it used to be, the edges of the fabric barely reaching past their chest when it used to skim the ground. She had no doubts that if they were able to stand, they'd be close to matching her in height.

Her eyes darted about for a moment before they finally landed on her needle, which was on the ground nearby, its thread coiled neatly beside it. Ghost's nail was present as well, the immaculate blade lay only a few meters away from where they were resting. Picking up both weapons, Hornet moved to sit at her sibling's side and began the tedious process of re-threading her needle while waiting for them to awaken.

As she worked, her body automatically went through the familiar motions without much effort, and her thoughts drifted towards the events that recently transpired. Just how long had they been trapped inside the temple? Both she and Ghost aged within the vault- that was apparent enough -but she didn't know how they'd gotten free in the first place. There was also the fact that they'd somehow gotten to the King's Pass as well.

Once she was finished preparing her weapon, Hornet turned to see Ghost lifting themselves up slowly. She paused to watch as they stood on shaky legs, their hand reflexively finding their nail and sheathing it upon their back with little fanfare. When they looked at her, Hornet's mind cried out with the urge to *flee escape get away!* As a dull orange light stared back at her from behind their eyes. Something within them pulsed, partially obscured by shadows and void, and it took all the restraint she contained to stop her from turning her weapon upon her sibling yet again.

Forcing her grip on her needle to relax, Hornet stood, only for Ghost to stumble and fall into her arms. Stunned, she held her trembling sibling and waited for them to calm down.

Thankfully, the heated glow receded from their gaze as they regained focus, and Hornet let the tip of her needle rest on the ground while she and Ghost looked at each other.

“So...we’re both alive.” She got a nod in response. “How...?”

Releasing her hold on them, Ghost slid to the ground and let out a noiseless sigh. It appeared that they had no answers for her. Patiently, she waited until they regained enough energy to stand on their own once more. With a glance, they began to make their way down the bridge that led to the town below.

Instead of following down the same path, she decided to test the strength of her thread. After embedding it in the side of the cliff and making sure it was secure, she leaped over the edge and let the bright string bear her weight as she slid down its length. Upon reaching the ground, she looked up to see them watching her. Their blank expression told her nothing of their mood, but when those blank eyes met hers she felt like they were smiling.

As the two of them headed for the town, Hornet took in the sparse light fixtures leading up to the dusty village. Although her purpose as Hallownest’s guardian was to protect those living even above the kingdom, she'd never seen the place for herself. She’d preferred to slip back into Hallownest through Greenpath if she ever needed to trek into the blustering wasteland just beyond their doors.

Now, after witnessing the town for the first time, Hornet could admit that she hadn’t expected it to be so... *lively*.

Dirtmouth was full of bugs crossing every which way. Hornet could scarcely believe that there were so many people in such a small space. Had their civilization finally recovered from the infection’s damage so soon?

While lost in thought, she barely noticed that the small knight left her side before a new voice gained her attention. Looking up, she spotted them, talking with another bug who was leaning casually against a lamppost beside a bench.

“Oh, hello there, Newcomer. Are you with this little one here?” Hornet nodded and hurried to Ghost’s side, placing her hand on their shoulder. She could feel the amusement they were expressing even without words.

“Please excuse us, my traveling companion and I have come here seeking entrance into the Kingdom of Hallownest. We would be most grateful if you could show us the way there.” With her head lowered, she couldn’t see their expression, but a short, barked laugh told her enough.

“No need to bow, miss. We aren’t like those rich bugs at the heart of the kingdom. Most visitors don’t know this, but the well is down that way-” they pointed towards the other end of the town, “-just before the cemetery. I’d suggest you be quick about it, though. There’s more bugs up here than I’ve ever seen before, and we’re expecting a huge crowd later. Something about an event going on below has everyone in a flurry.” Hornet glanced at the people bustling about the town. The number of bugs in the town already outnumbered how many she remembered seeing at once, so if they were preparing for even more, that meant-

A polite cough interrupted her thoughts, and she returned her focus to the individual standing before her. “If you don’t mind me prying a little, you and your friend don’t look like you’re from around here. Are you two performers or something?” Suddenly aware of how they must have looked to a stranger, Hornet repressed a shudder and politely asked for the location of a fabric shop.

Some time later found both her and Ghost a few pieces of geo lighter, and sitting at the edge of the town while she worked on fashioning two new cloaks. She knew that Ghost would be reluctant to hand over the garment that they'd worn for so long, especially now that it was imbued with the essence of their home. So instead of creating a replacement, she carefully crafted the one in her lap so that the old cloth could be layered on top.

Hornet worked in silence while Ghost rested beside her. They must not have fully recovered from what they suffered from before, because as soon as they were out of sight of the villagers, they returned to leaning against her. In the past, she would never have thought that she would be sharing space with the small warrior, yet here she was, sharing their space as amicably as possible. Once she finished her task, she held up the fresh cloak and took a few moments to admire her handiwork.

She may not have been a true spider, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t learned of the most important parts of Deepnest’s culture while in her mother’s care. Herrah’s loss was something that she would not soon forget, but now with the infection gone, there was no chance of a similar fate befalling anyone else.

After handing the deep blue garment to Ghost, she began to work on her own replacement clothing. Each methodic stitch soothed her troubled thoughts. For a while, everything felt somewhat normal. That feeling vanished when a new voice drifted through her mind.

‘*I didn’t know you could sew*.’

Within a second, her needle was drawn and she was rapidly looking side to side, trying to spot the owner of the voice. Hornet glanced about in confusion. There was no one nearby except for Ghost. Once her search turned up empty, she sat back down, a little more alert than before. Perhaps it was her imagination-

‘*I wonder what startled her*.’

“*Show yourself!*” This time, her weapon and body were both at the ready. Paranoia slipped in between the cracks of her shell, and Hornet found herself standing over Ghost as she scanned the surrounding area. What manner of strangeness was this? Where was the voice coming from? She was still weakened from their previous ordeal. She didn’t know if she could defend them both in this state.

‘So jumpy,’

Wait-

‘you’d think she’d seen a-’ Whirling about, she sheathed her needle and pointed at her companion.

“Ghost! You can *speak*!” The shorter bug jumped slightly and angled their mask towards her.

‘*Truly? You can hear me?*’ They sounded as incredulous as she did. ‘ *I thought- oh.’* Hornet let the tension bleed out of her as she sat down with a huff, picking up her discarded project and resuming her work with slightly more vigor than before. This was an unexpected change. Though, she realized, it was not unwelcome.

“Am I not wrong in assuming that you have not always been able to communicate like this?” Tightening the thread on her own cloak, she finished by tying it closed around her neck before donning her old clothing like a scarf.

‘*I didn’t know I could, until-*’ The noise in her mind ceased abruptly and when she looked back at Ghost, the orange glow was back, inciting a primal need to flee-attack in her chest as she forced herself not to draw her needle once more. *There is no reason to attack them*, she reminded herself, *They are my sibling. They are all I have left*.

It was a tense few moments before the light receded once more and Hornet was finally able to swallow down her panic. Standing up, she helped Ghost to their feet and made a short motion to straighten out their cloak, then dust off her own.

“Well, there is no use in having such regrets. Though I will admit, it is... nice, to finally hear your voice. Shall we?” There was no mental reply this time, but as they turned to start walking towards the well, a tiny hand slipped into hers.

For the first time in an age, Hornet felt at peace.

Chapter End Notes

Woo!

Chapter 3: Ghost 02

Chapter Summary

Ghost receives their tasks.

Chapter Notes

Uhhhhhh... Surprise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had felt like forever, but truly they knew it had taken a mere moment for The Radiance's power to send them to the past. The burning, searing sensation they had endured was reminiscent of what they'd felt while trying to seal away the Old Light before, only so much greater in intensity. It was something both incomprehensible and indescribable, and they knew that no matter how they tried, they'd never be able to explain it.

As soon as they were grounded in reality once more, The Radiance fell quiet, her voice vanishing from their mind like an extinguished candle. Following their abrupt transferral from the present, they lay in silence as they worked to gather their bearings and push past the agony that had coursed through their body only a short time ago. The remnants of her power still lingered in their shell, clinging on, yet failing to take root even after so much energy was expended.

Focusing their mind on before, they remembered what she'd told them before her spell's effect took hold on them.

'...SHE WILL GIVE YOU POWER...A CHANCE TO CHANGE...A CHANCE TO REDEEM...'

Ghost was somewhat reluctant in admitting it, but they wanted the same thing as The Radiance. They both sought to end the Pale King's reign over Hallownest.

It wouldn't be an easy task. Even after traversing the kingdom's lands many times over, they knew the journey ahead would be fraught with difficulties. However, they'd do anything for the rest of their kin. They were determined to save those who had survived the king's experiments. They would free those who were trapped deep in the heart of the abyss. Then, Ghost would attempt to release Pure from the bonds that had been imposed upon him by the wyrm.

In exchange for being granted the ability to make their dreams come true, The Radiance had requested a favor from them.

As it was, her consciousness still hadn't returned once they were recovered enough to walk on their own. So with no other options, they'd accompanied Hornet down to Dirtmouth and took their time to marvel at the state of the world around them.

Though even if Ghost was marveling at the condition of the town- which they'd only seen in an abandoned and withered state -they hadn't missed Hornet's cues.

The wariness, the unease, the eagerness to draw her needle.

Ghost trusted her not to turn her weapon on them again, yet they couldn't help but feel worried about how she'd react once she learned of just what they'd done. It was only after they realized that a connection had been made between them both that her nerves faded completely. It was still a shock to them.

They could actually speak to Hornet. Admittedly, it wasn't in a way that would let them communicate with others, but they had the ability to talk with at least one other being, and their *sister* no less.

The giddiness lasted up until a familiar heat bloomed within their chest just before The Radiance's diminished presence made itself known.

'...The Spell...A Success...' They hesitated at the softness of her words.

You've grown quiet. I thought you gone, Light.

' *...She Has Been Drained...Much Was Given To Go This Far Back...It Is The Shadow's Turn To Fulfill Their End Of The Bargain...'*

What would you have me do?

A series of images flashed in their mind. Infected bugs only just beginning to show signs of being affected by the plague, the ruined shrine atop the Crown of Hallownest, a nest filled with dusty cocoons, and a solitary moth singing near a graveyard with misted eyes.

'*...With Power Weakened, She Cannot Reclaim Her Right Alone...Little Shadow Is Strong...Can Call Back Her Pieces...Can Find The Last Of Her Children And Awaken Her Priest From Her Sleep...*'

With a sudden clarity, they understood the depth of their task. It would take another era to hunt down all of the infected bugs of this time. Even more so knowing that the number of bugs they had faced before was only a mere piece of the population that lived during Hallownest's prime.

The only way they could retrieve all the remnants of the infection without leaving any behind would be to-

No. They refused to think about that now. Another solution would present itself. They would just have to be patient.

Now, standing in front of the old entrance to Hallownest, they wondered if they were truly ready to face the consequences of their actions. Hornet was beside them, her hand still holding theirs. Ghost wasn't familiar with what they were feeling, but something about her presence brought them security. They supposed that being near someone who also shared a piece of the void- no matter how small -was a comfort.

As they gazed down into the softly illuminated depths, Ghost found themselves without fear.

This was a chance for new beginnings, and by the end of their new quest, they hoped that things would be better this time.

Readying themselves for anything, they jumped into the well.

Chapter End Notes

Bet ya'll weren't expecting this so soon lmao

Chapter 4: Quirrel 01

Chapter Summary

In the wake of an unseen event, the archives fall to disarray.

Chapter Notes

Quirrel? What a drama queen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something was coming.

He didn't know what it was, or how he even knew of its approach, but there was an energy in the air that left him full of anticipation.

Quirrel woke to a day like any other. He'd performed his duties as routine, following Monomon through the archive's glowing halls, helping to manage the volumes they kept of Hallownest's knowledge and assisting the other acolytes with their research. However, even as he tried to focus on the tasks before him, his mind wandered constantly. There was a persistant buzzing presence just below his shell that made him distracted and restless. All attempts to devote his attention to his work failed, and soon after so did his willingness to continue to try.

When he was alone, Quirrel would compile his thoughts either on the discarded tubes that were deemed unnecessary or on scraps of parchment that they'd formerly used to collect their findings. Though even when he recorded his own ramblings, the things he wrote down made little sense even to him. His dreams, as well as his waking moments, were full of scenes he could never have experienced. Brief moments flashed behind his eyes that confused him to no end, and through all this persisted the commanding sensation of anxiety.

Now while he found himself bewildered and unsettled, his teacher grew distant. As Quirrel fretted over his predicament, Monomon was withdrawing further and further away from the outside world. Where she was once eager to discuss new findings with her students, she was now oddly quiet, leaving a palpable emptiness that worried the rest of the archive's inhabitants. Her lack of engagement had the acolytes struggling to uncover why she had become so silent. Soon, their distress combined with her head assistant's continued lack of focus slowed their work to a crawl.

All this was happening at the same time that Quirrel was still trying to comprehend the King's request. It'd been a shock to witness the pale one himself within the archive, the regal crest he'd seen so often now real and standing before him. He and Monomon listened to his words and held their breath until the heart of the matter was given to them. It was with a tight voice that Quirrel heard his teacher agree to give the wyrm's dire proposal more thought before presenting him with an answer. The tense silence that followed held fast until the monarch left the canyon with his guardians trailing at his sides.

Not once could Quirrel remember Monomon being so silent in all his time serving her. The familiar streams of information that she delighted in explaining were sealed up, and only the stifling atmosphere of the archives remained without her voice to grace its hallways. Quirrel feared that the cycle would continue forever and that he'd be trapped in a cycle of distraction while his mentor faded away.

Then, the day of the King's Procession arrived.

That morning, for the first time in what felt like forever, Monomon came to speak with him. She drifted into the room, her arms curling and twisting around themselves. Quirrel was surprised, but the respect he held for her kept him from speaking as she floated silently for a brief moment before presenting her inquiry.

"Does the air in Hallownest not seem strange to you as of recent?" It wasn't something he'd thought about in depth, but once she made the change apparent, he couldn't help but agree.

"It's actually felt quite tense now that you mention it," he murmured. "Why? Have you discovered the source?" Monomon shook her head and Quirrel forced himself to ignore the feeling of slow-building dread. The madam was wise, and although her foresight was impressive, she didn't have the answer to everything.

One of her tentacles curled around a storage tube he'd been using to record his thoughts and Quirrel briefly considered the idea of reaching over to pull it away. "Whatever is having such a profound effect on the caves...it clouds my thoughts, my dreams turn to mist when I wake. Its presence is so strong, I wonder..." Her voice petered out slowly before returning with curiosity lacing its edges. "Quirrel, have you had any interesting dreams lately?"

His heart all but stopped at her inquiry. All at once, he was reminded of the blurred images that filled his consciousness. Quirrel hadn't ever imagined that they could possibly be connected to the changes, their source hanging just out of reach. However, even if they weren't related, he couldn't withhold the truth from her.

Focusing on the images, he tried to explain their significance to her. "I feel as though I've been remembering things...dreams or memories? I can't tell, but they make no sense to me. I see places I have never been to, bugs I don't remember meeting, and sometimes there is another-" Warmth rushed to his face as a series of thoughts spilled into his mind unbidden.

Two beings sitting on a bench amidst a raining city, a destroyed kingdom so familiar, and lost conversations in places he'd never been to. In most of the dreams, there was also a bug of

somewhat small stature who was content to sit and admire the world around them with him at their side. Something about the way their horns curved atop their head, and the unblinking stare that should have felt odd, yet held a certain measure of comfort-

An overwhelming sensation flooded his chest and with a choked gasp, Quirrel found himself hunched over his workstation. When he glanced up, he saw Monomon floating nearby, her head bowed as she pondered over his words.

“...Yes, I think I see now.” Before he had fully regained awareness, Monomon had already wrapped an arm around his wrist, tugging him along with her towards the entrance. “We are now part of something much greater than ourselves. What is coming will change Hallownest in a way that I could never have foreseen, and I do believe that you will be close to the center of it, Quirrel.”

He didn’t fight her, for there was no point. Once Monomon had set her mind on something, there was nothing anyone could do to change it. Succumbing to his fate, Quirrel allowed himself to be dragged behind her, his thoughts still reeling.

“I shall try to decipher the meaning of your dreams later, my assistant. For now, we have an event to attend.”

Chapter End Notes

/sticks my legy out rl far/ You'll never get a consistent update schedule out of me.

Chapter 5: Hornet 02

Chapter Summary

Hornet learns the truth of their circumstances.

Chapter Notes

im so mad this chapter is Incredibly Short

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once they'd made their descent into the crossroads via the old well, Hornet began to slowly piece together the idea that there was more to their unexplained escape from the black egg vault. In between the sleeping and the burning, there'd been something else that happened before they woke at the King's Pass. However, what that thing was, she didn't know yet.

As soon as she and Ghost reached the crossroads, she saw bugs. Not bugs who were reanimated husks or mindless corpses wandering aimlessly amongst their former home, but real living bugs. They were pulling shellcarts and talking to each other casually, and as she stood there amongst them, Hornet was hit with an odd feeling as she realized that she'd never seen Hallownest in such a way. Although she'd grown up in the wake of the kingdom's prime, Hornet couldn't remember witnessing the very kingdom she'd promised to protect so full of life.

"Ghost," she began, matching her sibling's metered steps as they walked on with purpose in their stride, "I am starting to think that there is more to this than I originally thought." Besides a slight pause in their gait, they gave no indication that they'd heard her. and Hornet let them lead her on in silence through the familiar tunnels before her curiosity got the best of her. "We were supposed to have been sealed within the black egg forever. What did- how did we escape?" Their head tilted forward slightly.

'*Later*... ' The simple request rang through her mind, just as soft as before, and she acquiesced with little fanfare. They would tell her in time, now that they could.

Not much later, the two siblings found themselves standing in front of a wall of bugs. Glancing about, Hornet saw that all throughout the room, there were civilians. Bright-eyed bugs stood shoulder to shoulder, all of them humming with anticipation for some grand event. Was this what the bug in Dirtmouth had meant when he said he was expecting a crowd? Hornet hoped not. The mass of bugs in front of her reminded her more of a swarm. As she

tried to look over the heads of the bystanders, excited whispers carried throughout the cavern, bits and pieces of information reaching her through the din.

Tugging gently on Ghost's hand, she tried to lead them away from the commotion.

"Come, we can find another way around." She turned to head in the opposite direction of the commotion, but she was pulled back. When she glanced at her sibling, Ghost pointed towards a somewhat sheltered alcove just above the crowd that overlooked the path that everyone was watching.

Once out of the way of the other bugs, it was a simple matter for Hornet as she used her needle and thread to hoist them both up to the ledge. When the pressure from the room below abated, she couldn't help but sigh with relief. Looking over at Ghost, she folded her legs beneath her and prepared to wait. It wouldn't be smart to attempt traveling against the flow when there were so many individuals filling up the crossroads.

As she watched the commotion occur under them, she felt a weight settle against her side. Glancing down, she saw Ghost leaning on her. There was a brief moment where she considered pushing them off, but instead, she reached around to wrap an arm around their shoulder.

"Will you explain now?" she asked. Hornet felt them shift to look up at her before hesitantly taking a handful of her cloak, their voice spilling into her mind.

'*...Used the power of the Old Light to send us back before Pure became the Hollow Knight. We are no longer in the Hallownest you remember.*' Their words stunned her. '*I'm sorry. You never asked for this.*' She could feel their remorse echoing through their mental link, but the only thing she could focus on was-

We're in the past .

They were in a time before the Hollow Knight was sealed away by the dreamers.

They were in a time where her mother was still alive.

In a split second, Hornet's arms were wrapped around Ghost. Their bewilderment and confusion flooded her senses, but she held on until they reciprocated, their shorter arms wrapping around her neck.

"No, no, do not apologize for this, this-" Hornet struggled to find the proper words to convey her emotions. "-this gift! I am the one who should be thanking you..." she whispered.

"Our world was dying. Even if you had successfully sealed away the infection…" She didn't want to think about it- the idea of her and Ghost trapped in stasis for an eternity as the rest of the kingdom crumbled around them. "Here...here we can prevent all that. In this time, Herrah- my mother, she still lives." For the second time since waking up at the mouth of King's Pass, Hornet felt hope.

In that tiny space above a sea of clamoring bugs, the child of the Beast embraced Ghost in earnest as the possibilities raced through her thoughts.

Unfortunately, the moment had to pass eventually, and it did so with the sound of thunderous applause coming from below them, forcing the two siblings out of their reverie. Carefully, they folded themselves even deeper into the shadows that their hiding spot provided, and soon they both understood why everyone had gathered along this route. If they leaned forward just enough to peer around the corner, they could see the approaching form of Lurien the Watcher and his fearsome knights.

Chapter End Notes

/spits blood/ writing is hard

Chapter 6: Ghost 03

Chapter Summary

The siblings witness a Parade.

Chapter Notes

/throws this chapter away from myself as fast as possible/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Lurien appeared- his guardians flanking him on all sides -Ghost forced themselves not to panic. The watcher knights were a formidable set of foes, and even though they'd only faced off against the reanimated husks of the hulking bugs, they still remembered the panic they felt as they desperately tried to avoid being crushed until their sturdy shells. The protectors of the spire's keeper were much more imposing in life than they'd been in death, and Ghost had no wish to clash nails with them again.

Glancing over to Hornet, they wondered if she held any recognition for the figures passing below. Ghost could recognize several faces, if only because of their curiosity over the records left over from Hallownest's fall, but their sister- someone who had grown up during that age -most likely knew even more than they did.

As they leaned out further to get a better look at the passing nobility, Ghost reached out for Hornet with their thoughts. ' *Do you see anyone familiar?* ' they asked, their voice momentarily obscuring the noise coming from the crowd of excited bugs below.

Ghost was aflutter with curiosity, and as their sister lifted her head to watch the proceedings, they couldn't help but tug on her cloak impatiently. Hornet kept her gaze focused on the regal forms traveling through the cavern despite their pestering, and after a few moments of careful observation, she turned back to them.

"I suppose you should count yourself lucky, for I do recall a fair number of the ones currently a part of this display. Though, you'll have Herrah to thank for that. She wanted me to be well versed in the knowledge of important figures of both past and present." she said, before moving to sit closer to the edge of the alcove. Ghost sat at Hornet's side and watched with an unfamiliar delight as she pointed out the figures of those that she remembered, hints of warmth seeping into her voice as she made use of her mother's teachings.

Ghost was sure that she could've continued to speak until the parade's end, but both siblings startled as heavy footsteps approached the cavern. An imposing- and familiar -shadow cast itself against the wall, and Ghost watched with surprise as the great figure of the Mighty Hegemol stepped out from around the curve. Briefly, they considered the irony of their situation. They had only known the great knight from tales told by others, and they'd never truly faced him in battle either. After sparing the maggot that stole his armor and seeing the statue guarding the gates to the City of Tears, they began to wish they had a chance to know more about the other warrior bug.

Soon, their attention was focused completely on the display. Ghost watched as the rest of the five great knights proceeded to follow in Hegemol's quaking footsteps. They couldn't help but perk up upon seeing Ogrim in shining white armor, and a soft, noiseless laugh rippled through their figure while they watched as those standing closest to the odorous knight backed up to avoid the stench. Not far behind was a graceful figure in green whose appearance made Hornet gasp softly.

"That's Kindly Isma, the King's lost knight. They say she vanished before the Hollow- *Pure's* sealing for reasons no one knows." Her words sent Ghost's thoughts back to the acidic sanctuary that Ogrim devoted himself to protect, and the figure at its heart, a body surrounded by vines and foliage. The beetle knight had defended her grove valiantly, despite not knowing she had already passed on. Seeing the living figure before them, they promised to try and prevent such tragedy from repeating itself once more.

While their plans to stop Isma's death were already forming, Mysterious Ze'mer strode past, her graceful movements reminding them of the harrowing journey they'd made to deliver the mourning gift to her lover's grave. Ghost remembered how she'd crumbled into shining dust as soon as they returned, her grieving, wilted form dissolving before their eyes. What would it be like? Getting to know these warriors in their prime, listening to them, learning from them, perhaps even *training* with them. It was enough to make Ghost shiver with anticipation.

However, before they could fully lose themselves in thinking about the possibilities, they felt Hornet shake them back into awareness.

"Ghost- Ghost! *Look* !" Their gaze snapped to where their sister was pointing and something inside them seized. A coldness began to seep through the entirety of their being, the chill obscuring all rational thoughts as the rest of the world fell out of focus around them.

At the very end of the parade, guarded by Fierce Dryya, was the Queen of Hallownest.

Ghost remembered seeing Dryya before- the knight's corpse had lain outside the White Lady's dwelling -her sacrifice unbeknownst even to the one she gave her life to protect. They wondered how long she'd spent waiting outside, protecting the self-exiled queen until her untimely death. Yet the pale being she watched over was the sole source of their ire. She wasn't quite as big as she was in their time, yet the soft branches extending from her head still brushed the roof of the cavern as she passed. Her blue eyes were dark and vibrant with youth, nothing like the glassy gaze of blindness that Ghost witnessed before. Vivid memories of the Pale Root wrapped up in restraints of her own choosing flashed before them.

They remembered being in awe of her the first time they had met. She'd recognized them even with her lack of sight, and later gave them half of the Kingsoul. It was only because of her that they were able to return to their birthplace once more, for no matter how brief a visit. Yet at the same time, she was also the reason they'd been forced to remember-

Ghost didn't know what to feel. Their mind was a swarm of unfamiliar emotions, the shadows inside them restless as they tried to still their thoughts.

fear, curious, hurt, want, curious, hate, confusion, want, fear her! fear her!

She had been waiting for them- or rather, she had been waiting for one of their kind to find her ever since she had sequestered herself away with only her loyal knight for protection. The White Lady felt no remorse in sending Ghost to replace their sibling, even after knowing what sort of a fate awaited them within the Temple of the Black Egg. She'd spoken of regrets of choices past, yet even then, she was willing to throw them away, just like the rest were-!

Upon finding her in the depths of the overgrown garden they felt an immediate kinship, a longing for something unlike anything they'd experienced before. That need was dashed away the moment she encouraged them to take Pure's place, the realization that she only saw them as another means to an end erasing any hopes they had for a relationship as parent and child. Even so, as Ghost saw her now, they could not deny the piece of them that screamed out *Mother!* as she passed.

It was a tense few moments for the two siblings as the Queen's entourage crossed and then disappeared around a bend, from where they could no longer see. Hornet's claws were digging into their shoulder and they found themselves trembling with distress. Glancing down, they saw themselves clutching the handle of their nail with an iron grip.

"After Herrah became a dreamer I fell under the Queen's care for a time. I don't remember much of what she was like because I was very young," Hornet started, her voice unsteady. "But there is something about her that unsettles me to my core. I suggest we avoid her for now"

Ghost didn't reply, but the barely restrained anger spilling from their quivering form said enough.

Once the event was over, the two siblings remained hidden in their alcove until the crowd was thin enough for them to slip away without being noticed by any of the nobility from the procession- a few lingering upper-class bugs staying behind to mingle with the common folk. Once they'd gained a good amount of distance from the former parade route, they settled in to figure out their next moves.

'*So, where should we go next?'*

Hornet slowed her stride and glanced up at the crossroad signs- all of them in pristine condition beneath the light of a lumafly lantern -before turning back to Ghost. "I know this may seem selfish of me, but I would like to see my mother before we do anything...drastic."

Ghost could sense Hornet's eagerness to see Herrah once more, and they knew it would be cruel to put off such a reunion- even if it was one-sided -any longer than necessary. "Though, you could also visit *that place*, since we are heading in the same direction."

'*You would be correct, though I dare not make the trek to the abyss now.* '

"Why not?" The confusion in her voice didn't surprise them at all.

'*In this time, the Pale King lives as well*,' they explained, '*and his palace isn't far off from where the rest of our kind was sealed away. It would do us no good to draw his attention so soon when we have not even begun to make a change in this world.*' Hornet made a noise of understanding. *'We'll see Herrah first. I'm sure you've been wanting this for a long time*.'

They knew she wouldn't fight them on this, and the unbridled sound of pure joy that came from their sister as they headed below left them feeling just as excited as she was.

Chapter End Notes

consistency? I don't know her

Chapter 7: Quirrel 02

Chapter Summary

Panic! at the King's Procession

Chapter Notes

oh no i gave quirrel anxiety

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monomon insisted that he join the King's Parade. *Why*? Quirrel didn't believe that she would ever impart that particular piece of knowledge on him. Either way, it was too late now to be thinking about how he could avoid participating. They had already passed through the kingdom's capital. Once the procession reached the center of the crossroads, they would turn around and return home.

Or, that's what he'd thought before the parade itself finally arrived at the last destination.

Being surrounded by knights of all kinds did nothing to calm his anxiety, and even his teacher's presence could not soothe his troubled mind. Every moment he spent awake was filled with anticipation for something he didn't understand. He was sure that Monomon was experiencing something similar. She'd admitted it herself, after all. The sensation encompassing his entire being wasn't just a general feeling, it was more like a constant pull directing him to places unknown.

He could feel it. The call, the need to find something-

Someone, his mind provided unhelpfully.

As Quirrel marched beside his mentor, he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, despite the hundreds of eyes already gazing upon him. They were almost through the crossroads, and he was eager to return to the archives and resume his duties as a scholar.

"Isn't this lovely, Quirrel? Look how many have gathered to watch the proceedings." Later he would admit that he couldn't remember replying verbally. Maybe he'd nodded his head or murmured in agreement, but at that moment his attention was elsewhere. Almost as if his body was operating on its own, his eyes scanned above the heads of the excited crowd, searching.

'For what?' he asked himself.

His restlessness was only amplified the moment he noticed bugs staring at him, obviously wondering why he wasn't behaving like one of the King's procession should. The borrowed nail lance hanging from his hip started to shake as he trembled.

Why couldn't he remember what was so important about this place? There was something he was forgetting- but the images he'd seen in his dreams, they never could have happened in the first place.

He didn't understand!

With his mind overrun with noise, Quirrel didn't even hear the announcement of the parade ending, nor did he register the sensation of one of Monomon's tentacles wrapping around his arm and directing him away from the stifling noise.

He finally able to catch his breath once the crowd was behind them. The commotion slowly faded away as he sat down, clutching his head. After a while, he slowly stood up.

"My apologies, madame. I didn't mean to cause such a disturbance." It took him a moment to realize how out of breath he sounded. Overwhelmed by frustration, he tried to hold in a noise of dismay. What must the spectators have thought, seeing such an unstable case like him beside Monomon? He hoped that his behavior hadn't tarnished his mentor's reputation-

"Quirrel, you really do need to stop thinking so loudly. It isn't good for you." Her voice brought him out of his self-deprecating thoughts.

"I'm- I'm sorry, please-" he gasped. A slightly fluorescent tentacle came up to hush him, and he forced himself to stop speaking.

Monomon hovered beside him in silence for a moment before she drew away and nodded her head solemnly. "A lot has been happening recently, what with the parade and the work we've been doing for the King's plan. It was only a matter of time before the pressure became too much for you to handle. That isn't even counting the sudden changes occurring as of late, or the pestilence that spreads among the fringes of our kingdom's society. Though I believe I know what will help you to recover from these stressful circumstances." When he looked up, she seemed content with the conclusion she had achieved.

Whatever his teacher had decided for him, he would accept it gracefully and without contempt-

"Quirrel dear, I am putting you on indefinite mandatory leave."

Immediately, his previous thoughts were dashed from his mind as he stood. "What- no! Madame please, the archives are my life - !" What would he do if not serve her? He'd never thought of it before. Monomon must have realized this as well.

Shaking her head, a laughing tone reached him as she reached out to hold him steady. "I appreciate and adore your enthusiasm for the art of storing knowledge, my student, but you

cannot spend your whole life in the kingdom's archives. Once, a long time ago, I traveled far and wide to learn all about the magnificent places and beings who live in Hallownest. It was an experience that proved invaluable in discovering and cataloging the information that I now seek to protect." She hummed.

"I am not only telling you this as your teacher, but also as your friend, Quirrel. I want you to travel these lands as I have, meet its inhabitants, and see all the beauty and wonders it has to offer. I will still be here when you return, and by the time you are back I believe we will be able to come to an agreement on what we should do about the King's request."

"But can't we already do that? Why must I leave?" Monomon shook her head amusedly at his questioning.

"Quirrel?"

"Yes, madame?"

"I'm sure that once you go on this adventure, you will surely cross paths with whoever it is you are looking for." Something within his chest fluttered at the statement even after he finished watching Monomon glide away in the direction of the archives.

Would exploring Hallownest truly lead him to the one who plagued his dreams? Was it possible that he would at least find answers to why he felt so strongly about them?

Double checking to make sure that his nail was still attached to him, Quirrel squared his shoulders and began to plan.

He had no idea if this experience would help him or not, but he figured he might as well try.

After all, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Chapter End Notes

> lms if ur teacher ever told u to leave school and never come back until you've done some proper soul searching

Chapter 8: Hornet 02.5

Chapter Summary

Hi ho to Deepnest we go~

Chapter Notes

i MESSED UP SO THIS IS NOW 2 CHAPTERS IM S o RR Y iTS So SHORT

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hornet may not have been a born-spider, but she still knew how to find her way back to Deepnest by heart. The hardest part of the journey was navigating the crossroads while avoiding the remaining bugs left over from the parade, and later traversing through the fungus-infested wastelands that separated the rest of Hallownest from the homeland of the spiders. However, once they'd passed those obstacles, navigating every twist and turn of the darkened, labyrinthian construction was second nature to her. After all, her mother never wanted her to get lost in her own realm.

The bugs of Hallownest were taught to fear those who lurked in the farthest corner of their world, but the sheltered inhabitants of said kingdom never knew the measures that Herrah took to protect her one and only child. Just before reaching the section of Deepnest where the spiders patrolled, Hornet stopped and reached into her scarf for an object that she hadn't needed to use for some time. The charm's thread-covered surface was smooth and comforting, and as soon as she fastened it to her cloak, four balls of silk materialized in front of her.

Reaching out to catch the newly formed weaverlings, Hornet giggled softly as they skittered over her arms and settled on her shoulders. Deftly catching one before it could scurry out of her reach, she handed it to Ghost, who unceremoniously lifted the tiny weaver up and set it between their horns before following.

As they progressed further into the heart of the colony, they could both hear the whispers following them. For a pair of strangers to carry the Weavers' blessing was unheard of, but Hornet knew that their observers wouldn't risk attacking them if there was a chance of drawing the ire of the revered threadmakers.

Blissfully unencumbered by any of the numerous sentries that were undoubtedly hidden along the path, the two siblings spent the rest of their time on the route to Herrah's den by

talking. Or, rather, Hornet spoke softly to Ghost and their words would float through her head in response.

'*Since we are in a time before your conception, Herrah likely won't know who you are.*'

Hornet had already thought about that, the underlying implications lingering in the back of her mind since Ghost told her the truth about the circumstances surrounding their release from the black egg. "Yes, I'd be a fool to think that she would recognize me, even though part of me still hopes. I am simply content to see her. We spent only a fraction of my youth together, but I remember it all so vividly." There was an urgency to her movements and a longing in her voice that she couldn't hide.

'*You must be excited at the very least.*' Hornet nodded and when she felt them reach out for her she took their hand without hesitation. *'Is that what being happy feels like?* '

"I don't know. Very few of my memories could be considered what most would describe as being... happy." Hornet tilted her head back to look at them. "What do you think it feels like?" She watched them in silence for a moment as the weaverling- which was formerly content to rest on their head -began to climb up one of their horns.

'*I think it feels like the time I defeated you in Greenpath*.' As soon as their words registered, Hornet spluttered with surprise.

Ghost's mental laughter rang out as she let go of their hand, her footsteps hastening as she rushed ahead. "Just- *just keep up!* "

The added distance between them did nothing to stop her sibling's chitters of amusement from echoing through her head.

Chapter End Notes

/discordant screeching/ NEXT PART IS HAPPENING??? VERY SOON

Chapter 9: Ghost 04

Chapter Summary

what's wrong, kiddo? afraid of spiders?

Chapter Notes

yay we're making Progress™

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Ghost finally caught up to Hornet, she was already at the entrance to Herrah's den. The Distant Village was full of massive hanging nests, all woven together with sturdy webbing. Ghost remembered when they had discovered the place and found it to be quite devoid of life. In this time, dozens of spidery beings crawled and skittered amongst them. Their wary gazes tracked the two siblings, though Ghost could see most of them focusing on Hornet.

The red of her cloak stood out amongst the dark surroundings of Deepnest, and her needle was held limply in one hand. The weaverlings on her shoulder had ceased their excitable crawling, the magical constructs apparently aware enough of their surroundings to know when they should and should not be still. Once they reached her side, they didn't make any motion to move past her. They simply watched as their sister stared at the opening before her, lost in thought.

' *Are you ready to go in?* ' Ghost asked. Hornet nodded wordlessly, then they were inside.

The heart of the nest was exactly the same as they remembered it, yet thankfully, the odd husks that entrapped them the first time were nowhere to be seen. The walls were covered in webbing of all different kinds, some translucent, some opaque, all of them perfect for trapping unsuspecting bugs, and the dimly lit corridors were still confusingly similar.

In sticking close to their sister as they traveled through the den, Ghost could see Hornet's mood change from eager to hesitant. Her steps grew slower the deeper they went. By the time they were nearly at the center, she'd slowed to the point where they were leading slightly as she dragged her feet along the uneven floor. Lightly tugging on her cloak, Ghost tilted their head up to look at her. To their surprise, Hornet was shaking.

"I don't think I'm ready for this, Ghost," she whispered, her gaze trained on the entrance to the room where they'd found Herrah before- the memory of her sleeping form returning to

them. “I thought I’d be satisfied with seeing her alive, but the relationship we had as mother and daughter... Will I ever get that back? Perhaps it would be better if I didn’t know the answer.” The defeat in Hornet’s voice was so unlike her that- for an instant -Ghost could barely recognize her.

They wanted to say something, anything to bolster her spirits, but before they could reply, a pair of voices echoed down the winding hallways towards them. In a flash, Hornet all but ripped the charm out of her cloak- the weaverlings falling apart into loose threads -and stowed it away before she tore several thick webs from the wall and pulled Ghost down to the ground. Draping the layers of silk over them both, Hornet swathed herself and Ghost in the heavy material so they wouldn’t be seen. While trying to make themselves as small as possible before the voices came closer, Hornet’s gasp of recognition only increased their curiosity. They strained to understand what was being said, but the moment they were able to hear the words clearly-

‘ ...*KILL THE USURPER!* ’ Their limbs moved on their own, and with a jolt of dread, Ghost realized they were preparing to draw their nail as the two individuals drew near. The Radiance’s voice screamed out within their mind as they struggled against her, a rage and will that wasn’t their own fighting for control of their own body. She was urging them to move, to strike at the wyrm before he was aware of their presence, to *destroy-!*

In an instant, Ghost’s nail was torn from their grip and their entire body was swaddled in a familiarly uncomfortable combination of silken webbing and thread. Their impromptu cocoon was then adhered to the wall, well out of the way. Ghost could still feel the Radiance’s anger, but stripped of their weapon there was nothing they could do except wait for Hornet to cut them down again. Faintly, they could hear Herrah’s words as her claws tapped down the corridor.

“Your... proposal is an interesting one, Wyrm, though my followers and I have long faced the scorn of your kind and the Mantises. Everything I do, I do for them. Though you understand, of course, seeing the lengths you’re willing to go to for your kingdom.” Following her graceful tone came a voice that Ghost had only heard once before.

“With this bargain, you and the rest of Deepnest would be Hallownest’s trading partner and ally. That is, not to forget the other... gift I have promised you...” Ghost shuddered at the Pale King’s words while the Radiance churned with rage inside their shell. “Think of my offer... You know where my palace stands...” They couldn’t even hear the wyrm depart, but soon after, the light within them calmed just enough for them to start forgetting about the burning sensation lingering in their chest. For a few moments, they simply hung in the darkness. Then, Herrah spoke once more.

“The worm king is departed from my domain, yet there is still a presence I feel here, and it is not of my kin.” Ghost heard the sound of claws shifting amongst the webs, the last recesses of warmth fleeing their body as a chill raced through them. “Reveal yourselves, strangers, before I show you how fiercely a Queen can defend her nest from intruders.”

The familiar sound of a needle being drawn rang through the quiet hallway. In a series of quick, fluid movements, Hornet sliced apart Ghost’s restraints, set them down upon the

ground, re-sheathed her weapon, and bowed gracefully in front of the one she'd formerly known as her mother.

"Forgive us for the intrusion. We were just leaving-" Ghost felt Hornet pull them up by the arm before a massive needle blocked the pathway out. They tried to look for an opening, but Herrah's imposing form filled the corridor, preventing any escape.

"Oh, but we haven't had guests in so long." Although she spoke lightly, there was an underlying threat in her voice that promised danger should they not comply. So with no other choice, Ghost and Hornet let Herrah usher them into her domain.

Ghost felt their unease increase the moment they were herded into the den. At the opposite end of the room was a small congregation of dandies, their eyes glowing in the low light. The group was careful to move out of Herrah's path as she approached, their taunting whispers audible even as they departed.

"Now then..." Herrah folded her legs beneath her body and settled herself in front of them. "I'm sure you two are quite eager to tell me about everything you've seen and heard on your travels during your stay here. After all, I do so love hearing tales from outsiders. They're always nice to listen to before a large meal." The menacing aura the Queen Spider exuded was was enough to have Ghost shaking.

They had only ever seen Herrah asleep, but now, after witnessing her in her prime, they realized that she was quite possibly the most terrifying being they had ever met.

How was Hornet handling this? Ghost glanced over at her and noted her stoic posture. Since she had been raised by Herrah, it made sense that whatever she was feeling wouldn't be obvious on the outside. Yet even when they reached out with their mind, they sensed nothing. Thankfully, they didn't have to worry in silence as Hornet took charge.

"Revered Queen of Deepnest, my companion and I do not intrude upon your domain with the intent to do you or your kin harm. Within your kingdom, I sought to find someone important to me, but I now realize the futility of my efforts. If you let us go, we shall leave in peace." She finished off her plea with a graceful bow, and Ghost found themselves hoping that Herrah would have a momentary lapse of mercy on them both.

"You may be honest in your plea, young one, but you have still trespassed upon my lands. Such an act requires recompense, but what can you do to make up for your wrongdoing?" Ghost began to shake as Herrah stood once more and began circling them. They wanted to seek out Hornet's hand for comfort, but stopped themselves short, settling on grasping the edge of her cloak in a tight grip. After a third complete loop, Herrah paused in her pacing.

"Recently there has been a rather… *unfortunate* increase of Hallownest bugs crawling around in these caverns. The ones we caught told us that they saw their deceased loved ones at the borders of my domain before we threw them out. Most of the others we find as corpses down below. Whatever is luring those weaklings out of the safety of their kingdom hasn't bothered with my kin," the *yet* went unsaid. "But the Pale one's weak followers are becoming a

nuisance. If you can get rid of whatever is attracting the worm's foolish followers into my lands, I shall grant you both your freedom." With that, she stepped away from them, granting them enough room to breathe again, if only slightly.

"Your kindness is unending, Queen Herrah. We have inconvenienced you enough already, but we've traveled far to find this fabled village. If you would permit us a short while to rest-" Before Hornet could finish, Herrah hummed with amusement and turned to leave the room.

"Stay here if you will. I'll know if you leave of course, but I'm sure we won't have any issues, hm?" With one last look, Herrah departed, leaving them both to settle.

Letting go of her cloak, Ghost followed Hornet as she crossed the room and braced herself against the wall. After sitting down next to her, they felt the light sensation of something small skittering over their cloak. A weaverling crossed their field of vision, and Ghost realized that she must have re-equipped the charm from earlier once more. Draping her arm across their shoulders, Hornet rested her free hand on her needle and sighed noiselessly. Hesitantly letting their head rest on her shoulder, Ghost leaned into their sister's embrace and forced their fear of Herrah out of their mind.

Chapter End Notes

im still praying for hornet & ghost's interactions to not be ooc but ive mostly given up at this point

Chapter 10: Ghost 05

Chapter Summary

oh my god a bossfight

Chapter Notes

/screams in the key of c/ FOUR CHAPTER UPDATE, KIDS

Ghost didn't know how long they'd slept at Hornet's side, but they knew it wasn't long enough to chase away the exhaustion they felt at trying to maintain an unafraid appearance in front of Herrah. Their sister woke before them, and without even giving them a moment to regain a proper awareness of their surroundings, they were stumbling out of the Beast's den with Hornet pulling them along. Even though they weren't fully rested, the haunting voice echoing out of the nest behind them startled them into awakeness.

"Return to me once your task is finished, little ones. But don't you dare think about leaving our beautiful home. My followers will escort you to where the last victim was found." The two siblings left the odd silence of the village with the feeling of eyes upon their backs.

Ghost and Hornet were led in silence to the edge of the village by two of Herrah's followers and a short, round spider which skittered along invisible threads. The two devouts melded with the darkness once they passed the threshold that separated them from the rest of Deepnest while they continued to follow the weaver in front of them. Their 'escorts' may not have been visible, but both siblings knew they were there. The sound of heavy claws against earth was unmistakable after all.

It wasn't until they were well out of the spider's territory that Ghost remembered that they were without a weapon. Tugging lightly on Hornet's cloak, they pointed at her needle and back to themselves. Without looking back, Hornet drew their nail from below her scarf and handed it back to them. After checking over the weapon to ensure it wasn't damaged- which was unlikely if not impossible, Ghost's nail was *perfect* -they turned to look at her. She must have sensed their confusion because soon after, they heard her sigh.

"I'm sorry, Ghost. I was not able to succeed in telling her the truth." Hornet lowered her head, moving forward on instinct while Ghost traced her footsteps. "She was right there in front of me, but I couldn't even-!" A noise of frustration cut through the air as they caught the flash of Hornet's needle striking rock. "Why can I not even accomplish this simple task? Now we must find and defeat some monster that attracts bugs with images of their-" Hornet

paused both her words and her stride without warning, Ghost just narrowly managing to avoid colliding with her as they stopped short.

'*... Hornet?*' They peered around her just in time to see the weaver they had been trailing after shoot over their heads, screeching in a panic. When they looked ahead, a familiar form was watching them.

'Pure!' Their older sibling was in front them, their cloak fluttering as they leaped down and out of sight. Ghost would have rushed after them if it weren't for Hornet catching their arm with her thread, pulling them back before they could make chase. '*What- Hornet, let me go! I have to follow* -' When they looked back, they caught a glance of Hornet's shaking form.

"*No*, Ghost. That was not our sibling." Her words- somber, uneasy -woke them from the daze they had been trapped in upon seeing Pure, or rather, an image of them projected by the beast they pursued. With sudden clarity, they remembered.

'*Our foe...the shapeshifter.*' How had they forgotten? The monster lured them in once before. Back then, Ghost had seen another vessel and had given chase. It was terrible, not having a voice to call out to their sibling. *Stop running! Come back! Can't you see we're the same?* they'd wanted to say, even as they chased the other all the way past the corpses of the many, many bugs that came before them. At the end of the tunnel, they'd caught up to the creature, but it hadn't been what they wanted. They found the others, but-

'*I've already defeated it once before. We just have to follow it to its nest.*' Hornet recovered quicker than they did, and soon the two were chasing after the image of Pure as the creature used its puppet form to lead them down to wherever it was that it kept its victim's remains. As they traveled deeper, the familiar sight of deceased travelers was a sad reminder that they still wouldn't be able to save everyone.

"There is something you aren't telling me, Ghost," Hornet said, her gaze following them as they took the lead in their pursuit. "Something happened before…"

Ghost tried not to let the slew of unhappy feelings flood back into their heart at the reminder of what they'd seen at the center of Nosk's lair. Eleven bodies had hung far above them among the throng of victims. All of them belonged to vessels like themselves. Never before had Ghost fought with such a ferocity behind their strikes. Although the creature who wore their face was fast and nimble, they refused to cower as it charged towards them. Their nail had hacked away at its limbs, and when it sent down pustules of burning infection, they'd jumped out of the way before waiting for an opportunity to strike once more. All of this was projected to Hornet, whose aura grew increasingly grim as their memories swirled within her mind.

'*Others escaped from the Abyss. Others like me. I wish I could've gotten to know them, but I found them too late*,' their thoughts were tinged with sadness, but even then, they didn't allow their emotions to get in the way of what had to be done.

After a while spent traveling through the increasingly dark tunnels, Ghost jumped when they heard the sound of the way back sealing up behind them. When they turned around, a familiar black webbing was blocking the pathway out. Hornet was pressing ahead, fully absorbed in

her mission, and they rushed to catch up as even more webs sprang up behind them. In the recesses of their mind, Ghost felt the Radiance stirring.

'*...THE BEAST YOU PURSUE... IT SHARES A PART OF HER...*'

Is that supposed to mean something to me? The Radiance sent out a flash of heat through their body and Ghost flinched slightly at the unpleasant sensation as they caught up with their sister.

'*...USE THE WEAPON FORGED FROM HER STOLEN SHARDS AND DRAW IN HER LIGHT... SHE WILL ASSIST IN REIGNING IN THE SCATTERED PIECES...*' A weapon forged from stolen shards of the Radiance? They had no time to ponder on what she meant, for as their mind returned to the present, they realized that they'd stopped next to Hornet at the mouth of Nosk's den.

"Ghost, is this it?" Hornet asked. They knew even without glancing back that the entire corridor was sealed shut. The two of them would have to see this through to the end.

Looking up at their sister, Ghost nodded. '*The beast is inside.*' Before stepping into the room they paused for a moment to think back to the Radiance's words. A weapon made of dream- *the dream nail*. Although they'd once used it to peer into the thoughts of others, they'd never considered what the talisman would be capable of with the Old Light's power at their disposal. Now they only needed to figure out how they'd get Nosk to stay still long enough for them to use the relic on it.

'Do you think you could trap it with your thread? I have a plan, but the creature has to be restrained for it to work.' A typical Hornet answer would have been for her to say yes, or simply nod in agreement. Ghost wasn't expecting her to freeze up completely before slowly whispering out a question.

"Then, will this be like when you fought the Hollow Knight?" She sounded afraid, which was something they were uneasy to hear in her voice. In a moment of clarity, they realized that- trapped within the black egg -Hornet hadn't been awake like they had. She had probably jumped into the fray thinking that Ghost would succeed with her help. Except, she had been knocked away during the battle before being trapped in stasis, not knowing whether she was alive or dead. Ghost shuddered to think of what such torment could do to one's mind.

'*This battle will not end in the same way as that one, I promise you*.' They hoped that she sensed their conviction. Thankfully, Hornet seemed satisfied with Ghost's response. Squaring her shoulders, she glanced down at them.

"If you are so sure, then I suppose I will simply have to trust you." She gave them a brief nod before stalking into the room with Ghost at her heels. "We will defeat this monster and prove ourselves to Herrah. Then, we shall continue our journey to right the Pale Wyrm's wrongdoings."

'*Together?*'

"Together."

The moment the two siblings stepped into the room, they were immediately greeted by the sight of several hanging corpses. The bodies of deceased travelers were strung from the ceiling with a thick black material, and Ghost felt something inside them twist as they caught a glance of a couple of the dead. Not everyone could be saved, but they would still regret each loss. The shadows within Ghost's shell wailed softly, and their resolve strengthened as they turned to face the false image of Pure perched in the center of the den.

As Hornet and Ghost drew their weapons, the puppet form of their sibling began to rattle and tremble. A sickening crack accompanied the sight of the impostor's head twisting at an unnatural angle, a familiar sensation of disgust and horror rising up in Ghost's chest as they watched the false image of Pure become increasingly distorted. The orange sac of infection at the creature's core was the first to appear, then the sharp row of spines along its back, before its large, clawed legs erupted from its sides and extended outward towards them, the true visage of Nosk revealing itself to the two siblings with a deafening scream.

The monster screeched and skittered almost impossibly fast towards them. A second before it reached them, Hornet used her needle and thread to hoist herself far above it as Ghost darted between its legs. Slashing at the claw-like appendages with their nail, Ghost worked to confuse Nosk. Their nimble dashing and jumps kept its focus on them, the creature spinning about in a confused and bewildered rage as Hornet flew from wall to wall, using her thread to spin a trap worthy of a true spider.

To Ghost's surprise, the shapeshifter didn't retaliate by spitting infection at them, or even by sending down the burning sacs of fluid from the space above its nest. As they dodged and slid out of range of its violent thrashing, they realized that in comparison to their previous encounter with the violent mimic, this fight was almost *easy*.

However, they didn't have time to think about the cause, because after a few more quick passes around the room, Hornet called out to Ghost.

Her cry had them rushing forward as they baited Nosk into to charging at them. Its attempt was cut short by the sibling's trap, for instead of chasing Ghost across the room, the beast shrieked wildly as Hornet pulled her thread taut. The previously limp strands of silk that Hornet had spread across the room ensnared Nosk's limbs. With its legs tied together, the monster was quickly knocked off balance with another strike from Ghost's nail, its sharp, misshapen body crashing to the ground in front of them.

With its claws rendered useless, and its ability to move all but null, Ghost stepped close to the felled being before drawing the dream nail. From deep within, a feeling they'd never experienced before burst to life as the Radiance's power flowed into the talisman- its light shining even brighter than before. They only had a second to marvel at its appearance before they turned to their enemy once more and swung.

Entering the realm of dreams always left them disoriented at first. Void and Light were never meant to mix in such a way, and Ghost remembered the Seer's warning of what would

happen to them should they linger for too long in that place. It took some time for them to adjust while their awareness returned to them in pieces. As they climbed to their feet, Ghost realized that their surroundings were made of familiar shadows, with the telltale signs of the infection there as well. Lingering tumors of sickly orange clung to melting black as they tread carefully across the uneven surface of the room. None of the other dreams had been like this. The floating stone platforms and dream-motes were nowhere to be seen, the world around them was more reminiscent of the void than anything like the moth's holy grounds.

Upon reaching the very center of the strange dream, they were greeted by the sound of soft weeping. In the middle of the room was a tall pillar of darkness. Its form was hunched over, and rivulets of both void and infected light were dripping from its body. Still on guard, they held their nail at the ready and approached with caution. Once it sensed them, it lurched forward with surprising speed, crying out loudly in a mixture of pain and desperation as it rattled out a broken mantra.

"Have I finally proved myself, my King? I told you! I told you, I told you, I told you I could do it! Did you see? Did you see? I did what you asked me to!" The shadows around them wept as the light pulsed angrily, and Ghost felt the Radiance shift within them as the pieces of infection sang out. "You said I couldn't hold it, but I did! I did, I did, I did and I didn't let go! I never let go! They will stay with me forever and ever and ever!" Its broken voice soon switched to laughter before it began to weep uncontrollably.

"*The test, the test is over? The promise fulfilled? Will you let me out now? Will you let me rest now?*" Hesitantly reaching out for the distraught figure's face, Ghost trembled as its body shuddered with agony the moment their fingers made contact. It wasn't attacking them, but they already knew the next part would hurt.

Whispering out an, '*I'm sorry for this. You can rest soon,*' Ghost withdrew the dream nail once more and they struck out at the dilapidated form.

Its scream echoed endlessly as the infection was ripped from its body. In turn, Ghost had to open themselves up to take in the pieces of light. It burned as their body was filled with the remains of the infection, the rage saturating it sent them into spasms of pain, though after a moment, the Radiance's presence flared up once more. They felt her reaching out, searching, pulling in her scattered pieces from the rest of Deepnest and drawing them back into herself. After what felt like a lifetime, the light was gone- its oppressive heat replaced with a dull warmth in their chest, and instead of a melting, oozing mass at the center of the room, there was a shade.

Ignoring their shaky limbs, Ghost slowly stepped over to the familiar floating form and sat down upon the now stable ground, the void-black having receded to reveal stone underneath. Eventually, the other figure opened its eyes and gazed at them wordlessly.

'*Are you feeling better now?*' Ghost asked. The shade glanced around, confused, before looking down at themselves.

"...I am? I am! How strange." Their glowing white eyes focused back on Ghost as the corners turned upwards in a smile. "*Hello*."

Ghost woke to the sight of the remains of Nosk's body melting away. The shadows congealed together for a moment before rushing towards them. Thankful that they were already on the ground, Ghost let the purified void sink into their shell, filling them with a coolness that starkly contrasted the perpetual heat of the Radiance's light. As soon as all of the material had been absorbed, Ghost was glad to hear a soft giggle in the back of their mind.

Worry not about me, oh Heart of void. With you, I shall remain until it is time to return home.

Satisfied that their job was now complete, they looked up to see Hornet finish cutting down the last of the bodies that had been suspended from the ceiling of the cave. When they approached her, she cried out with relief and leaned down to inspect them closer.

"Ghost, you have returned to the world of the waking!" They nodded even as she walked around them in a tight circle, searching for wounds in their shell. "You are unharmed, then our mission was a success. The beast ceased its struggles after you hit it with that strange relic of yours, but you went down as well. I thought you gone. What happened?"

'*I went to the realm of dreams to separate the infection from the shapeshifter. They were a void construct made by the king.*' Hornet's surprised jump made them wonder if she would have rethought their task had she known of that particular fact beforehand. '*I suspect that the shape they were trapped in was a result of another one of the wyrm's failed experiments. They weren't granted a form such as you or I, so they took on the appearance of others instead*.' Ghost could feel the shadows within them shifting guiltily and they sent a soft wave of reassurance back to their distressed kin.

"Well, I will admit then that I am glad we have ended their suffering. With no body left as proof of our victory, I figured that the best we can do to would be bringing back these-" Hornet pointed to the corpses she'd cut down from above, "-so that their families can mourn them properly." Now that they had time to look properly, Ghost realized that there weren't as many as there were when they'd first challenged Nosk, but any loss was still palpable to them. However, among the numerous bugs making up the dead, there wasn't a single-

Oh, is the room outside finally clear?

I think so.

The creature is gone!

Where did it go?

Four new voices interrupted their thoughts, and Ghost spun around, trying to find the source. Hornet's attempt to ask them what was wrong was met with an outstretched arm as they gave her the sign for pause.

I feel something. Something familiar.

It's outside. Wait-!

Little One is here!

Really? Truly?

Ghost's insides churned as they approached the opposite end of the room. The wall there-

They're coming this way!

Ooh, over here, over here!

Quickly! We've been waiting so long!

Can you hear us?

Without wasting another moment, Ghost pulled out their weapon and swung it repeatedly at the stone in front of them, the wall crumbling easily beneath the strength of their blows. Once the pathway was open, they let out a noiseless gasp as a group of vessels stared back at them. They registered Hornet's noise of realization, but their feet were already moving automatically until they were right front of the others, their siblings reaching out for them and drawing them into a tight embrace.

Ah, there you are! What took you so long? Ghost felt an unknown emotion begin to build up somewhere inside them. *Were you waiting for us? I'm sorry. You've grown so much!* Their sibling's disembodied voices filled their head. If they were physically capable, Ghost was sure that they would be crying.

Now look what you've done! Another one chided. *Don't be upset, it's okay now. We're here.*

There were arms surrounding them, and Ghost noticed that they were being hugged by at least two other beings. When they focused on their surroundings again, they realized it was four.

We missed you so much, Little One! That light that took everyone away was so scary, but we were lucky enough to get out before- wait, who is that? At their sibling's inquiry, Ghost was suddenly hyper-aware of Hornet's silence. An image of her standing over the corpse of one of their fallen kin back in Greenpath flashed through their mind, but they quickly shook the vision away. Hornet wasn't the same as she used to be. It took some time, but she was more understanding now. So, as their sister's careful, evenly measured steps grew closer, Ghost forced themselves not to flinch as she looked over the other vessels.

Thankfully, their trust in her was well founded, for once she was at their side, she spoke lightly.

"I do believe that there are introductions to be made here," she said, turning to face them. Ghost felt her drape her arm across their shoulder as excitement flooded their body.

'I couldn't agree more.'

Chapter 11: Hornet 03

Chapter Summary

This is the probably the most awkward mother/daughter reunion ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Nosk was defeated, Hornet was surprised to discover that she and Ghost were no longer alone.

It appeared that the cavern just behind the shapeshifter's den had housed something that neither of them was expecting, and the four beings that had immediately latched onto Ghost were, indeed, vessels. Hornet could remember fighting other vessels in the past, if you could even call it that. Most weren't skilled enough to provide her but a few seconds of combat, but now the thought of turning her needle on them made her violently ill. It was the will of the King that she sought to rid Hallownest of the rest of the former monarch's progeny. They were dangerous, her mind repeated, but in all her time spent dealing with the small void constructs, only one of them had made that statement into truth.

Now, Hornet didn't dare allow herself more than a few moments to inspect the newcomers. They all seemed healthy to her, but after the memory of Ghost's last glimpse of Nosk's den flashed behind her eyes, she insisted that the group make a stop before they reunited with their escorts. It was fantastic luck for all involved that Deepnest's hot spring was located so close to the border. There, the other four vessels would be safe while she and Ghost completed their task uninhibited and unquestioned by the spiders.

It took some time for both siblings to carry all of the traveler's bodies out of Nosk's former lair and deliver them to the entrance of the tunnels where Herrah's followers were waiting, but it was something that needed doing. Although Hornet had urged Ghost to take their siblings and move on ahead without her, they'd insisted that she wait for them to return so they could face Herrah together. So, while Ghost tended to the others, Hornet sought to finish what she'd started. Later, with the last of the deceased finally transported to the edge of Deepnest, she allowed herself a moment's respite.

Sitting upon the ground of her former home, Hornet tried to remember the last time she'd visited the spider kingdom before Herrah's death. After their leader went to fulfill her duty as a dreamer, the rest of Hornet's kin were turned mad by the infection. At the very least, she was thankful that even with the old light whispering in their minds, they still retained enough of their original instincts to recognize the presence of their princess. Yet without her mother, there was seldom a reason for Hornet to step foot in Deepnest.
Now, she and Ghost had done something impossible together. The air in the tunnels was

clearer, and the sickly atmosphere that was beginning to fill her former home had dissipated with Nosk's defeat. Hornet knew that both her mother and the rest of their kingdom would be safe. Deepnest would not fall to ruin this time. That fact brought her peace.

Soon, the sound of footsteps over barren rock brought Hornet out of her reverie, and a quick glance over her shoulder revealed Ghost's approaching form.

' *Are you ready?* ' Their voice- soft as the shadows they commanded -filled her head once more and she nodded to them as she stood.

"As I'll ever be. You're certain you don't mind leaving the others on their own?" she asked. Though she wouldn't say it out loud, Hornet was curious about the other vessels. Were they like Ghost, or did they all have different personalities? Would she be able to communicate with them in the same way she did with her closest sibling? The possibilities were, admittedly, exciting to think about, with Hornet channeling the energy from her thoughts into her steps as she immediately picked up a brisk pace and started in the direction of the Distant Village. Ghost had to walk twice as fast to keep up with her lengthier strides, but they didn't seem bothered by it in the slightest.

' *The hot springs were empty when we got there, so I think they'll be safe in the meantime. The other entrance was blocked off, so the king's workers must not have finished construction on the tram yet* .' Hornet tried to remember if she had been around for the completion of Deepnest's tram station.

"If I remember correctly, the tram wasn't finished until just some time after Pure was sealed away, so you are correct in the assumption that the scenario of anyone finding them is quite unlikely. The village's inhabitants don't tend to make a habit of traveling his far away from their territory." Though that didn't mean it was impossible for the group to be discovered. "Still, in any case, we shouldn't linger. It will be better for us to find somewhere more secure as soon as possible." Ghost didn't respond, but she figured that they were already trying to think of a safe place to hide their surviving siblings. The prying eyes of the Pale King were more prominent in this time, and a single misstep could spell doom for them all.

Along the way, Hornet wondered when she'd started caring so deeply about the rest of her void-kin.

When the two of them arrived back at the Distant Village, the spiders who had formerly watched them with distrust in their gaze seemed subdued, though Hornet figured that it was most likely due to the news of their victory over Nosk being spread by their former escorts. Numerous pairs of eyes watched from all corners of the nest as the two siblings approached Herrah's nest with confidence in their strides.

Before stepping inside, Hornet paused at the entrance of the den. Would her mother truly let them go even after this? They'd fulfilled their end of the agreement, but was it enough to sate Herrah's demands? Glancing down at Ghost, she caught them looking at her expectantly. She didn't want to have to fight her way out of Deepnest if it wasn't necessary, but now there were others depending on her. Others who were so much more vulnerable than her in every way possible.

With a degree of hesitance, Hornet reached out for her sibling's hand. The sensation of their claws tightening around hers brought a flood of reassurance. She didn't need to hear their voice in her head to know that Ghost was supporting her. As she entered Herrah's nest, Hornet felt like she was ready for anything.

Or, rather, she would've been prepared for anything except for the spider queen herself snatching up Hornet with two of her arms and lifting her up while laughing exuberantly. In that moment, Hornet was terrified at the possibility of the abrupt action startling Ghost into doing something impulsive. Thankfully, her worries were unfounded as her own feet touched the ground mere moments after, the gentle fashion in which she was set down almost a blatant reminder of what she'd missed when her time spent with her mother came to a close.

"So, you have returned and proved yourselves. I should apologize for such a welcome, but Deepnest will have two causes for celebration now that the creature has been dealt with." In the amount of time it took to speak her praises, Herrah's voice changed completely. While it had been deep and threatening before their return, it was now softer and full of mirth. Such a tone was something that Hornet had only experienced a few times in her youth, and for a second, she allowed herself to hope.

Herrah shifted some webs out of the way and Hornet beckoned Ghost to join them both in the center of the room. The gossipping dandies that normally attended to her mother were nowhere to be seen this time, and the familiar bench was still lying in the center of the room. She could feel the bewilderment coming off her sibling in waves, but she couldn't help the tiny giggle that escaped her as she watched them step lightly across the threshold before hurrying to her side. While Herrah was preoccupied with something, Hornet allowed them to fuss with her cloak as they tried to check her over as inconspicuously as possible.

Ghost ceased their worrying as soon as Herrah noticed them, their anxious fretting replaced with a sharp shudder. As a consolation, Hornet let them clutch her hand securely, content to focus on the ever-present connection between them instead.

"Ah, your companion is here as well. Now I can ask," Herrah rubbed her claws together. "Tell me, what are your names and why have you traveled to my kingdom, visitors of Deepnest?"

Hornet glanced down at her sibling and received a stiff nod in response. There was no turning back now.

"I am Hornet, and my co- my *sibling's* name is Ghost. We came here seeking someone of great importance to our cause," she paused to gather her wits, "and that someone is you, Queen Herrah." There was a moment of silence before Herrah's laughter cut through the tension.

"Is that so? You should be pleased then, because we have been waiting for you as well." Hornet stood still with shock for a moment as she tried to process what she'd heard.

"Waiting for me? But, I haven't even-" Cutting herself off, Hornet watched as her mother shook with amusement at her reaction, the spider's shoulders trembling with mirth.

“It may come as a surprise to you, but I am not so cold as to be ignorant to the blights plaguing those who reside within my own home. A select few in our village started growing ill some time ago. They bite and claw-like beasts possessed, and as for the origins of such an ailment, we had no clue. When news of our problems reached the worm king of Hallownest, he came to me with a proposal.” Hornet thought back to the tail end of the conversation she’d heard while hiding among the webs within the Beast’s den, the Pale king’s whispers grating on the inside of her mind even in memory. “Yet, he does not know that before he offered his services to me, I sought guidance from the weavers who spun together the threads of my kingdom’s foundation. In their dreams, they witnessed the arrival of a needle-wielding figure in red with a shadow at her side, and in her wake, freedom from the suffering that haunted the minds of my kin.” There was an undeniable hint of pride in Herrah’s voice that set Hornet alight with anticipation.

“My sibling and I were only doing what should be done. Chances are that even without your demands, we’d have dispatched the creature causing this problem on our own. Though I must say, I am thankful for the opportunity to prove myself of usefulness to you and the rest of your kingdom.” Hornet’s steep bow prompted another bout of laughter from Herrah, and as the Queen of Spiders leaned back, she felt Ghost tense at her side.

“You’ve done more than simply prove yourselves useful,” Herrah said as she glanced down at them both, “for the task you’ve served has also cured the ones affected by the sickness, and you’ve given me even more of a reason to loathe the worm king with every fibre of my being. His offer was one that I know I’d eventually be forced to agree to under the circumstances, but now, I am no longer bound to his selfish whims. Instead, after your actions today, I have no doubt of the path that has been laid clear before me.”

With that, the two siblings looked at each other as excitement thrummed just below the surface of their shells. At the same time, Hornet felt an indescribable urge to turn and flee from the room with Ghost in tow. There was a nagging feeling that pulled at the edge of her mind while her memories of Herrah all seemed to blend together. There was something she wasn’t getting yet, but even so-

“I haven’t shared this fact with anyone except for my most trusted followers, but in truth, I cannot grant my kingdom an heir. My people are vulnerable without a future to believe in, and without a child to take my place-” As Herrah spoke, Hornet thought she felt her heart stop in her chest. “-if you are willing, I would name you my successor as the future Queen of Deepnest.”

Never before had Hornet wanted to be less right in her assumptions than she did at that moment. What was she supposed to say? How would Herrah react if she declined? Hornet’s mind was alit with questions. *Isn’t this what you’ve wanted since you were brought back to this time?* she asked herself. So preoccupied were her thoughts that she didn’t even notice that she’d collapsed against the bench with shock until Ghost’s nervous tugging broke her out of her trance. In the short time she’d spent fretting, Herrah had come closer, the imposing aura she once exuded now replaced with one of concern.

“Worry not about my request for now. With my kingdom safe once more, there is time for you to consider my offer, and that foolish worm is too prideful to believe that I wouldn’t

agree to his bribe. However, if my memory serves me well, you mentioned coming here in search of me, yes?" Hornet nodded slowly. "Then speak your piece, Hornet." At once, she realized the opportunity she'd been given. *This was her chance-!*

Jumping to her feet, Hornet shoved down the rest of her anxiety and faced Herrah with a regal will to match the spider Queen's own.

"Across these lands my sibling and I traveled, to deliver a warning to you and your kin." She lifted her gaze to match Herrah's six-eyed stare. "Although you have been told but only a fraction of what his plans are, the Pale King cannot simply be left to meddle with fate. Because if he is allowed to complete this grand scheme, he will bring about the end of this world as we know it."

Chapter End Notes

I don't know how to write Herrah

Chapter 12: Hornet 04

Chapter Summary

It's time for a change of scenery!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later, Hornet would wonder why she ever feared Herrah's response to her words. If there was one being who hated the wyrm more than she or her sibling, it was most likely to be the Queen of Deepnest. In the end, Herrah was quite content to listen to Hornet's advice. She never truly held any love for the Pale King or the rest of the inhabitants of Hallownest, so when Hornet began to outline the king's plan, she faced little resistance. To send not only her kingdom, but all of the caverns into an eternal stasis, thereby stopping the flow of time- any creature of reasonable mind knew that it was folly to go against nature, and to do so would only spell disaster.

After promising to come back and deliver her answer to the Herrah's offer when their journey was finished, the two siblings were allowed to leave Distant Village with her blessing.

And with that settled, there was only one thing left to deal with before they could leave Deepnest.

The other four surviving vessels were all nameless. Ghost told her this her shortly after their return to the hot spring while their siblings were still discovering what it was like to play in the healing waters. Occasionally. one of them would glance in her direction before returning their attention back towards the rest of the group, and her automatic response was to wave stiffly while trying to ignore the feelings she couldn't describe as they rose in her chest. Their empty gazes unsettled her, but Ghost said that they were simply curious.

Hornet was a stranger to dealing with others. Even those who resembled herself left her somewhat bewildered. Before, her immediate reaction upon seeing a vessel would have been to cut it down. Such an option was no longer possible, not after realizing that the smaller beings weren't just empty tools made by the wyrm to be ruthless killers. Hornet may have only shared a fraction of her power with the void, but she was still connected to it nonetheless. Ghost and Pure had both given up their lives to fulfill the Pale King's desires in one way or another. Now, it was her turn to try and help right the wrongs that her father had committed.

'*We could always leave them with Herrah.*' Hornet shot a glare at Ghost. That wouldn't end well for anyone involved.

“I don’t know where you got such a foolish idea from, but it would be best if you cut it out now before I do it for you,” she snapped. Ghost’s soft laughter drifted through her head while she tried to come up with a solution to their most recent problem. What would be a safe place to hide four vessels? They couldn’t go back into Deepnest for obvious reasons, but to above them was the Queen’s gardens, while to the east lay the Fungal Wastes and-

‘*They said that they can wait as long as we need, but I don’t want to leave them here for long. Someone could find them and turn them in to the king.*’ Hornet knew that Ghost wasn’t as unbothered as they seemed to be. Her sibling didn’t have as much experience dealing with emotions as a normal bug did, but the worry they were projecting onto her was so strong that it might as well have been her own. The ever-looming threat of the wyrm discovering their existence was an additional weight on her shoulders that couldn’t be shrugged off. Not yet.

Thinking back to her own experiences with escaped vessels, Hornet tried to figure out the best place in Hallownest to hide them. “If being found by the wyrm or his followers is our main issue, then they should go someplace the king would never think to look. The Distant Village is out of the question- and not because I don’t trust Herrah,” she added before Ghost could comment. “There simply isn’t enough room for them there- and the place isn’t built for most bugs to traverse, while everywhere else is unsafe. They need to be somewhere the king will avoid, a place that’s well protected-” A memory of scythe-like claws and long pointed nail lances flashed in her mind with startling clarity.

Could we go there? There is a gate to the heart of their village here in Deepnest. Although they won’t remember me either, she thought, pulling lightly on Ghost’s cloak to get their attention.

“How would you feel about a visit to the Mantis Village?” She asked as she stood, gathering up her needle and thread from where she’d left them on the ground.

Apparently, Ghost had fond memories of the tribe of warriors, as they had little hesitance in singing their praises mentally after sheathing their nail. *‘Will I be getting another chance to prove myself to the ones who called me a worthy opponent? They’re so skilled and fast! Such deadly and magnificent warriors they raise in their tribe. I wouldn’t mind seeing them in action once more. Why do you ask?*’

Giving her former home a farewell glance, she readied herself before tossing her needle up into the shaft leading towards Deepnest’s eastern exit. “I’m asking because I think they may hold the answer to our vessel-hiding problem. At the very least, they can point us in the right direction.” Hornet caught a glimpse of her sibling waving farewell to the others. She assumed they were communicating, though whatever they were saying wasn’t audible to her at all.

At once, she was reminded of how her connection with Ghost apparently wasn’t something she shared with the rest of the vessels. Knowing that fact made the silence in her own mind so much louder.

Not giving them any more time to wait, Hornet wrapped an arm around her sibling’s midsection, picking them up and holding them close to her side. “It’s time to leave, Ghost,” she said, a small gasp of surprise leaving them as Hornet used her free hand to hoist them both up and out of the hot spring, leaving the other vessels behind.

Neither of the siblings spoke to each other the entire way, and it wasn't until they were almost at the gate to Mantis Village that Hornet put her sibling down. As they continued onward, neither of the two were willing to breach the tension between them.

Unlike before, the path from the mantises' territory in the fungal infested wasteland wasn't sealed off. The entrance was still littered with the bodies of dirtcarvers, and Hornet winced at the sight of a few little weavers and deephunters among the throng of bodies, but the large stone doors separating Deepnest from the rest of the caverns had yet to be added. With an agitated sigh, Hornet forged ahead. There was no reason in dwelling on the reason for her irritation when they were entering potentially dangerous territory.

I can't be mad at them when they don't even know, she thought, *It isn't fair of me*. After all, it wasn't like Ghost could control whether or not she was capable of speaking to the other vessels. However, just once, Hornet wanted to-

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of something heading towards them. Acting quickly, Hornet jumped back and pulled Ghost to the side as a nail-lance and wind blade came rushing past them both. If she hadn't moved in time, both weapons would have hit her and Ghost straight on. Without waiting for a counter attack, both siblings had their weapons drawn and at the ready, which proved to be the right move as another volley of projectiles came hurtling towards the two of them. It was only with a fluidity born of time spent both training and battling the mantises that Hornet and Ghost were able to parry or avoid the weapons that were shot at them with deadly accuracy.

Once the onslaught had apparently stopped- the lances and scythes no longer coming in their direction with barely enough pause to breathe -the two siblings stowed their weapons.

"You there, guards! What reason do you have to attack a pair of travelers such as us?" Hornet shouted down the tunnel. If she looked closely, she could just barely make out the silhouettes of two of the mantis tribe's warriors- one standing, and one hovering nearby -keeping watch over the entrance. In response, the two seemed to converse with each other in rapid, hushed tones.

"Reactions like those aren't commonly found on mere travelers, stranger! Why don't you come closer? Our tribe welcomes strong warriors, even outsiders." One of the mantises called out to her.

'*We should listen, but stay on guard in case there are more of them beyond the gateway*.' Hornet nearly jumped with surprise at hearing Ghost again, but forced herself not to react beyond nodding back at them. Taking the lead once more, she approached the two sentries cautiously, her needle drawn. The standing mantis keeping watch came closer, while the other- ' *A petra? What are they doing here?* ' -monitored their interaction from a secure distance away. Glancing at the lengthy claws the warrior possessed, Hornet made sure to stay well outside of striking range, with Ghost safely behind her.

"Most bugs wouldn't be able to react so quickly to our attacks, you know." The mantis warrior seemed pleased, but Hornet continued to eye her warily as while her neck craned

over to look at Ghost. “Tell me, are you warriors such as us, or simply talented wanderers with skills from other lands?”

“My sibling and I are simply travelers looking to pass through your village in search of a safe haven for the rest of our kin. If you could permit us passage-” Hornet was startled by the sound of the mantis’ eager chittering.

“Oh, so you must be strong then, to climb out of Deepnest and into our lands unscathed,” she said. “We have been searching far and wide for someone who can-” Before the taller bug could finish her statement, the petra landed, their delicate legs settling softly against the ground before they let out a hiss of displeasure.

“Not to interrupt your *very* important inspection, but we weren’t put on guard duty just so you could let a few well-prepared strangers into the village unannounced!” Their voice, high pitched and grating, sliced through the air while their land-dwelling partner gave them a final glance. She made a noise of intrigue before stepping back.

“I don’t know. These ones seem different. They don’t look or smell sick like the others did. Your eyes hold a strange emptiness, strangers, but I will take that over the manic orange gaze of those we have cut down,” she reasoned, stepping aside so they could pass. “I think you should take them to the Lords. They might know something that could help-” The petra, who was once again alight, snapped at her before she could finish speaking.

“Ah-a-ah! *Shush*! We aren’t supposed to be telling that to outsiders. I’ll take them to the Lords, but if anything goes wrong, the consequences will be on *your head* .” They huffed sharply before turning and flying past the vacant throne room, only stopping to send Hornet and Ghost a command to “*Hurry it up!* The sooner I’m back on guard duty, the better!” as they flew upwards. While preparing to scale the wall in front of them, the siblings shared a knowing look.

Hornet hadn’t said anything to Ghost so far, but this time, she didn’t feel like she needed to as they followed the disgruntled sentry to the heart of the Mantis Village.

Chapter End Notes

holy god we're finally out of deepnest

Chapter 13: Interlude 1

Chapter Summary

Something about a Root and a Vessel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hello, Mother. The figure resting on the throne before them couldn't hear their words, but the sound of their approach made her aware of their presence nonetheless. From her place upon her seat, the bright figure of the White Lady turned around to look at them. The delicate crown of branch-like horns that spread from her crest swayed lightly as her soft blue eyes widened with recognition.

"Ah, there you are, my child. It's been so long since your last visit, I was starting to worry you'd forgotten about me!" Her laugh was sweet sounding even with the hint of sadness that clung to her words, and Pure felt the tension drain from their frame as they kneeled down beside her. "Now then, no need for such modesty. If my beloved king has been working you too hard then you should take every moment you can to rest. If you need to, I won't begrudge you for falling asleep on me."

Their own laughs were silent, marked only by the sight of trembling in their shoulders as they took her at least part of her advice. Setting their nail on the ground and sliding down to sit on the floor, Pure's head hit the side of the throne with a soft *thunk*. It wasn't as soft as the bed they'd once owned, but it was good enough for now.

As they leaned against the smooth surface, a pale hand came down to lightly caress their still growing horns. Although they were tired, Pure couldn't stop themselves from leaning into her touch. The king had never given them this sort of comfort. All the time they'd spent with the wyrm had been solely for the sake of work, sacrifice, and servitude to their kingdom.

"*You will be my perfect creation... A Pure Vessel to seal the heart of the old light for an eternity...* "

There would be times where the pain of containing such a powerful and enraged being would drive them to near madness. Her screams of rage were a constant source of noise in their own mind, and the manifestation of her anger was an unending blaze in their chest.

Pure had been too disoriented to truly know what was happening back when they'd been taken from the abyss by the king, but they could remember the words he used to describe his "creation". They were the Vessel, the Hollow Knight that would save the kingdom.

That is, until the infection started appearing once more. Bugs who lived near the edges of their grand civilization turned mad, and the fragile peace that had been instilled after Pure had taken on the old light began to crumble. With the return of the plague, the king had once again withdrawn into the recesses of the castle to work on a solution. They had caught some of the palace consorts gossiping among the halls about the king trying to negotiate with several of Hallownest's lesser-known denizens.

Many had all but forgotten that even though Pure did not possess a voice, they were still able to hear the whispers that reached them.

The Teacher, the Watcher, and the Beast; titles that they'd never heard of before were now the most common topic within the palace. Plans were unfolding out of sight of the rest of Hallownest's inhabitants, and Pure knew that soon they would find themselves at the center of the issue in time.

So, they would treasure these moments spent with their mother while they could, for soon, the king would fulfill his promise. Then, they could finally- *finally* rest.

Soon, soon, soon, I'll see you again.

Before they could doze off, the Queen ceased her gentle touches and set down the tablet she had been reading. When Pure looked up, they saw her eyes go out of focus. They knew in that instant, her mind was drifting far away, before the clarity returned to her gaze. Upon noticing them watching her, she wilted slightly.

"My apologies, dear. I seem to be fading more often these days. Something odd has filled the air as of late, and it has my darling Wyrm acting more restless than usual. He flies back and forth from his workshop to places unknown and back with barely a pause in his stride. I'm sure you've seen it, of course, but it does little to ease my troubled thoughts." She sighed heavily, and Pure wished they could do something, *anything* to lift her spirits. "Sometimes, I do so wish you could talk. Even now, my sight dulls and my memory fogs at the edges, yet you still remain at my side whenever my husband sees fit to give you a moment's respite. Would your words too be so caring after all you have endured? I think it would grant my tired soul a lightness even among these dark times."

Pure had never before wanted so badly to be able to speak. They wanted to tell her *No, I don't blame you for this*, and *Thank you for spending time with me*, and *I'm sorry for not being good enough*.

As it was, the White Lady recovered after a few moments, her horns slowly regaining their regal form after a bit of rest. In that time, Pure let themselves lean as close to her as they could. There would no doubt be more work after this short break. They wanted to take in as much of the love that the Queen gave out during their time together. It was never enough to truly fill the empty space within, but it helped with the pain at least.

But all too soon, the moment ended when one of the king's consorts bustled into the room. They shot a wary, poison-filled glance at Pure before presenting a request to the Queen- a summons to the throne room -and hurrying out again. Despite her regal nature, the White Lady still gave the note a huff of disdain as she stood up from the throne. Wordlessly, she

beckoned Pure to rise and leaned down slightly until they were close enough to hear her whispered words.

“My husband will be quite preoccupied with his negotiations for a time. I’ve noticed the increased frequency of your visits, and if he truly needed you for this plan then you would be by his side indefinitely until he required your services no more. Leave the palace now, while he is distracted by his work. I will keep him preoccupied for a time. It has been long since we’ve spent a moment in each other’s company.” Her conspiratorial giggle had them feeling excited for once, and they swept up their nail from where they’d left it before rushing towards the exit. They paused only to give the Queen a small, heartfelt farewell wave while she made her way to the king’s throne room. The delight in her eyes kept them going as they snuck past the guards in front of the palace. There was an energy they hadn’t experienced in a long time flowing through them as they deftly traveled up and away from the Basin towards the heart of Hallownest.

Thank you again, Mother. I hope I can make this up to you someday.

Chapter End Notes

END QUADRUPLE UPDATE. THANK U ALL AND ALSO IM SO SORRY.

Chapter 14: Ghost 06

Chapter Summary

/cue mantis village theme/

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As they walked through the familiar pathways, Ghost marveled at the sheer number of mantises living within the village. There were many more living within the armored walls now than they had seen before in their own travels through the civilization of warriors. In this time, there were a myriad of individuals on the ground and in the air. The petras that they had once battled within the Queen's Gardens were flying overhead, directing groups of mantis youths, while multitudes of land-dwelling types worked beneath them. At their side, Hornet followed along, looking just as comfortable among the tribe as she did among the spiders.

' *You seem relaxed. One would think that being surrounded by highly skilled fighters like these would make you nervous. How are you staying so calm?'* Was it because she thought she was better than them? Or perhaps it was because something else, they reasoned.

Hornet regarded Ghost with a tilt of her head and dropped her voice lower so their guide wouldn't hear. "I was trained by the Mantis Lords after Herrah completed her duty as a dreamer. Once she went to sleep, they took me under their wings and taught me what it meant to fight honorably. All three are as dear to me as my mother is. Their love was not one expressed with a gentle touch, but the instruction provided by their claws and lances helped me survive after the infection returned," she explained, before glancing around at her surroundings with barely restrained awe. "They were my teachers, my mentors. In a way, I owe them my life." The caring in her voice made a wistful feeling bloom deep within Ghost's chest, and they couldn't understand why. They didn't know why they felt longing at the thought of Hornet having bugs who'd cared about her when she was younger. Though, looking back on their own days of youth-

"Still your thoughts, sibling of mine." Hornet's arm fell across their shoulders, effectively stopping them from falling into despair. "No war has ever been won through sadness or regret. We shall move forward and carry the hopes and wishes of those who could never achieve what we have done. I implore you to focus on the future we will create together instead of the past our father destroyed." The brief moment of vulnerability was gone almost as soon as it appeared, and Ghost felt excited about the change in Hornet's formerly aloof demeanor. It had taken some time, but now, they *did* have someone who cared about them, even if they knew she would never let anyone find out and live.

Deeper they traveled into mantis territory, their guide only stopping momentarily to converse with other mantises. Ghost caught mere bits and pieces of their words, but the situation became more apparent the further they went.

‘ *You mentioned that only three of the Mantis Lords raised you? What of the fourth?* ’ Hornet’s sharp noise of disdain pierced the air while their escort was distracted.

“The fourth one... I knew him only by the stories the others told. There is no room for wild and rash decision making when you are a leader of a tribe such as this. He gave into the plague some time before I was to become their protege. His sisters told me that the infection had turned him into a being of war, and it consumed his thoughts while leaving his mind intact.” Ghost considered her words until a shriek split the air as the mantis petra they were following whipped their head around towards the two of them.

“Oh! Spies! Eavesdroppers! *Who told you that?”* They spat and hissed briefly before sighing aggravatedly and beckoning both Ghost and Hornet in closer. “I suppose you would have learned of it eventually, but that doesn’t mean you can go running your mouths!” They whisper shouted at the two siblings. “Most of our kin do not know of Lord Kieza’s state, and we are doing our best to keep it this way so panic does not spread through our ranks. Now hurry along, we’re almost there, and for kin’s sake, don’t mention this to anyone.” The mantis’ wingbeats increased as the group approached the heart of the village.

As they reached the very center, it became apparent that a large ring of mantises had formed around four impressive figures just barely visible above the crowd. Ghost could see the horns of the four Mantis Lords cresting over the heads of those watching, but their words were inaudible due to the noise.

“ *SILENCE!* ” The command carried over the chittering voices, and at once, the mantises surrounding the leaders quieted. Even their petra guide had landed silently some moments ago to watch the proceedings, their limbs held close to their chest as the eldest of the Mantis Lords attempted to reason with her sibling. “Brother, surely you must see the risks involving your plan. The bugs of Hallownest-”

There was an enraged screech as the youngest Mantis Lord swung his claws out in a wide arc, sending the smaller members of the tribe scurrying back to avoid him. “The bugs of Hallownest are weak, pathetic, worthless creatures! They know nothing of honor, of pride, yet we submit to them as though we are lesser beasts. I have seen the truth, the light that will guide us to victory against our foes!” Ghost noticed a few of the mantises in the crowd nod silently in agreement, and they realized that this was where the divide had started so long ago, before the traitors were outcasted from their lands.

The third eldest of the other Mantis Lords raised her lance in warning as her brother raged on. “Careful, Kieza. I hold as much contempt for those sheltered bugs as you do, but you know of our agreement with their King and what he would do were we to overstep our bounds...” Her reprimand didn’t slow him down at all, as the younger mantis whirled around to face his sister with another retort ready.

“Giosa, aren’t you tired of it all? Each day they grow more numerous, more greedy, they consume with little regard for the rest of us who call these caverns ours. One day they will grow tired of this peace and overtake us with sheer numbers alone. Our tribe is strong, yet we cower as their kind thrives. What will it take for you to see that we are slowly being driven out of our own home?” Hisses of approval rose from the crowd, and at their side, Ghost felt Hornet reach for her needle. Instead of continuing the conversation, the two warrior siblings sized each other up. Thankfully, before they could engage each other, their sisters stepped in to separate them.

“That is enough, both of you.” The oldest of the Mantis Lords came forth to stop her brother while Giosa was held back by her other sister. “Caria, please take these two to our room. I will follow in a moment. We have guests.”

Caria took ahold of both her siblings and pulled them along- the crowd of mantises parting before their leaders -before glancing back. “Don’t be long, Vatina.”

With a nod of confirmation from her older sister, the three Lords departed for the throne room- two under protest -and the remainder of the tribe members dispersed, the discussion clearly over. When the majority of bystanders finished returning to their normal duties, their petra guide finally relaxed enough to usher them forward to where the remaining Mantis Lord was waiting.

“Lord Vatina, these travelers met our attacks at the border.” They let out a long-suffering sigh. “The tall one mentioned seeking someplace safe, and Miqa insisted-” Vatina held up a claw and lowered her head to sweep over Hornet and Ghost with a look of appraisal.

“Say no more, I understand. You are free to return to your post.” The petra gave a quick bow with a rushed word of thanks and flew out of the cavern faster than Ghost thought possible. When they turned around, Vatina was already beckoning them to follower her back to the throne room. “If you two would follow me? I’m sure you have questions. If Miqa saw something in you, then you travelers must be of a special sort.”

The siblings shared a glance, then bowed in tandem as Hornet spoke.

“We’d be honored, Lord Vatina.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks 2 hollo lite for pulling me off my lazy butt again

Chapter 15: Ghost 07

Chapter Summary

there's no bug version of 911

Chapter Notes

/reverse dabs/ good god help me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although they'd separated from their reluctant escort, the trio returned to the throne room at a much slower pace than Hornet and Ghost did with their previous escort. Lord Vatina had to stop frequently to direct her tribesfolk and assist them. Despite these small acts distracting from their goal, Ghost couldn't help but admire how dedicated the eldest Mantis Lord was to her kin. After passing the busiest parts of the village, they were finally given an explanation for the events they'd just seen at the mantises' congregation.

Lowering her head, Lord Vatina kept her voice soft as she spoke. "A short while ago, an elderly bug plagued with delusions raged through the outskirts of our village. He'd been driven mad by an affliction of the mind, and he swept past our borders proclaiming that we must be eradicated. He destroyed several of our settlements and cut down many of our kin before we were able to dispatch him ourselves, and unfortunately, one of the casualties of his blind rampage was our dear brother's wife. Kieza took matters into his own claws after her loss, but when he returned, he was... different." She paused just long enough for the two siblings to take in her words.

"Something changed in him after that day. He has taken no time to grieve, and he barely rests or eats. My sisters and I worry that he will become like the very one who stole his beloved's life, and there is nothing we can do to help." Ghost and Hornet looked at each other in mutual understanding. With the elder gone, the heart of the plague in this region would be held within the being who killed him. With that revelation came the understanding that they would have to fight Lord Kieza. They might even have to fight with the few mantises present in the village who agreed with his views.

Neither of them had let go of their weapons since leaving the main hall. Although they could be considered guests, one learned to never let their guard down when in the presence of seasoned warriors like the ones who made up the village. Even the younger, inexperienced mantises could be deadly, and in this time, they didn't even have the protection of the tribe's respect.

When they finally reached their destination, Ghost took their time in admiring the elevated seats that the Mantis Lords rested upon when they weren't busy managing their tribe. Unlike in their time, four whole thrones stood proudly at the center of the room. Before they could relax, the sound of wingbeats alerted them to another presence beside Lord Vatina. However, the vaguely familiar individual that was approaching them now didn't seem dangerous in the least.

"Aunt Vatina! What happened during the tribe meeting? Father is- Oh! *Guests!"* Ghost watched as a delicate looking mantis fluttered down from a secluded cavern above the throne room. When she landed, she dropped into a low bow that immediately reminded them of a certain knight's deceased lover.

Lord Vatina sighed amusedly and brought the younger mantis into a brief embrace. "Lily, you really shouldn't be out here. You know how he gets-"

A soft groan of irritation came from who Ghost now recognized as the child of the fourth Mantis Lord. "Father is too overprotective. If these two are at your side and not on the other end of your nail, then they must be welcome here." Stepping around her aunt, she bowed before the siblings once more.

"Greetings, visitors to our village. I am Lily, daughter of Lord Kieza. Might I inquire as to who you are and what it is that seek from us?" Ghost tilted their head towards Hornet and let her step in front of them as she took initiative in being the first to lay her weapon down at her feet. Next to her, Ghost lowered their weapon as well.

"I am Hornet, and the one at my side is my sibling, Ghost. We are travelers seeking refuge for our kin. Currently, they are taking refuge beside Deepnest, but our goal is to find a place where they will not found by Hallownest's King." At her admission, both Lord Vatina and Lily seemed to grow more curious about their situation as Hornet continued to speak. "We are well experienced in handling infected beings. If possible, we would ask that in exchange for cleansing the infection that has ensnared Lord Kieza's mind, you would provide shelter for our remaining family. Even if it is only until we locate another safe haven for them." Ghost and Hornet both withdrew, letting the two mantises have enough space to converse silently.

It was perhaps scarier than fighting, Ghost thought, as they waited for the other bugs to make their decision. After a moment or two of waiting, the siblings watched as Lord Vatina stepped back to let her niece approach them herself.

The young mantis stood before them with hope in her eyes. "Brave travelers we will accept your offer, though I must selfishly request from you a favor of my own. If at all possible, I ask that you leave my father unharmed." Hornet and Ghost shared a look, and Lily doubled back with worry in her stance. "I know it sounds absurd, but, my father wasn't always argumentative or quick to strike. Before mind was claimed by the plague that grows at the edge of our world, he was as loving as any parent, and even now he is yet to be at peace with my mother's passing. Please, I beseech you, if you can carry out this task without his death, I would be eternally grateful." Lily bowed once more and waited for their response.

Hornet was the first to re-sheath her weapon and give Lily an empathetic bow. “We shall do our very best,” she said.

The young mantis heir nodded her head in thanks and retreated to her aunt’s side, wiping a few stray tears of gratitude from her face. “I must be on my way now to visit another one most dear to me. Aunt Vatina, will you-” Lily’s inquiry was cut off as a screech of indignation shook the cavern.

All four occupants turned their heads to watch as Lord Kieza clawed his way out of the same alcove that Lily herself had descended from several moments ago. Behind him, Lords Caria and Giosa struggled to hold back their enraged brother, their claws barely restraining him as he shrieked and hissed with a vengeance.

“Lily! I won’t let you leave to see that accursed knight! No child of mine will be caught dead consorting with the enemy!” He howled with rage as Lily leaped into a panic. Her wings carried her out of the room without so much as a farewell while her aunts tried in vain to restrain her father.

Ghost, Hornet, and Lord Vatina jumped out of the way when Kieza finally escaped his sister’s hold and crashed to the cave floor. He let out another cry of anger and started chasing after his daughter, all traces of clarity gone from his eyes. The other three Mantis Lords glanced at each other before pursuing him, with Hornet and Ghost following closely behind.

‘ *If he catches her like this-’* Ghost’s words were halted when Hornet wrapped a firm arm around their midsection and pulled them both upwards to keep pace with the mantises. When they were set back down again, both siblings broke into a run as Lord Kieza charged after his terrified child.

Dashing as quickly as possible, they copied Hornet’s example and held their weapon at the ready while she called out to them. “Let go of the future, Ghost! Focus your efforts on preventing it from becoming a reality once more.”

With their sister’s words and the memory of the Grey Mourner in their thoughts, Ghost pressed on. They couldn’t allow such tragedy to happen again.

Chapter End Notes

kieza doesn't know how to properly discipline his child (note: you cant punish them if they're dead)

Chapter 16: Quirrel 03

Chapter Summary

I am so sick of the word 'mantis'

Chapter Notes

/dabs crunchily/ good god whats up my fellow kids

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quirrel grunted softly as he finished climbing over the thick, bouncy mushrooms that made up the trail towards the Mantis Village. Already ahead of him was the imposing figure of the mysterious Grey Knight Ze'mer, who was scouting the area ahead as he attempted to keep up with her hurried stride.

In the wake of his teacher forcibly exiling him from his place of work, Quirrel had milled about the crossroads for some time, wandering the streets somewhat aimlessly as he tried to plan a route through Hallownest. In the end, he'd decided to head for the fungal wastes first, and it was only luck that allowed him to catch the Great Knight before she departed. They'd both stopped at a local village for supplies at the same time, and upon learning that he was a student of the renowned Monomon, she'd allowed him to accompany her in her descent.

Although they hadn't been traveling for long, the short trek had been arduous. Quirrel still wasn't used to exploring the caverns surrounding the muted, foggy landscape that Monomon had carefully crafted to protect her archive. The unstable, peaty ground and thick, spore-ridden air that made up the wastes was uncomfortable at best, yet the two pressed onward regardless of the circumstances. His lack of experience made difficult for him to keep pace with the seasoned warrior ahead of him, but Quirrel was determined to make his teacher proud.

However, such sentiments were holding less and less worth each time he fell face-first into a pile of rotten mushrooms.

After brushing off the soggy fungus off of himself for what surely must have been a dozenth time, Quirrel turned to Ze'mer. Her sheltered gaze made it impossible to tell what she was thinking from a glance, so he'd have to ask her directly. Stepping closer, he kept in mind the immaculately sharpened greatnail resting upon her back as he reached out to tap her shoulder. Thankfully, the stoic knight wasn't paranoid like the guards he'd previously encountered and simply tilted her head in his direction once he had her attention.

“Do excuse me, Knight Ze’mer, but are we getting close to the Mantis Village?” It seemed like the two of them had been wading through mushrooms for an eternity, and Quirrel couldn’t help but feel impatient. At the implied complaint, Ze’mer crooned with amusement, her antennae swaying as she tapped her foot against the ground.

“Ai, young scholar. We draw near to that hidden den of warriors. Over the cliff, past our weeping capital’s former gates lies their home.” Quirrel looked down over the ledge they were standing on and saw a few city guards keeping watch over a small group of menderbugs as they worked hastily to seal up the giant gates that connected the City of Tears to the rest of Hallownest. “Che’ cannot step past their borders now, but a bug like yourself couldst enter the mantises’ domain.”

Taking in her words, Quirrel felt confusion stir in his mind. “Why can’t you enter the village, and- and why are they sealing these entrances off? Will the bridge below be disabled as well?” Ze’mer’s antennae ceased their casual movement and began to twitch slightly.

She beckoned Quirrel to follow her, the two bugs taking a slightly longer path to go around the workers. Once they were well out of hearing range, Ze’mer seemed to deflate slightly. “Che’ knows not the details. Under Pale Monarch’s orders, knights we have been called to separate the raining city from the rest of the world. His paranoia and reticence are…” she paused before shaking her head sadly, “che’ has seen things she does not wish on any creature, bug nor beast.” Her tone lowered from concerned to fearful in an instant, and the implications of her statements left him shaking even as they walked. “Relations between nym’King and rest of those who inhabit this land, they twist and wind so deep. Che’ is bound to serve him, and the clawed kin of this valley loathe his image so. T’would be a needless danger for one such as I to provoke them.”

Understanding reached Quirrel as he followed in Ze’mer’s footsteps. “I see... so then why would I be allowed in? I might not be a true citizen of the kingdom any longer, but I am still an outsider.” Ze’mer swiftly descended the cliffside before them and waited for him to catch up before responding.

“It is a borrowed weapon you carry, yes? ‘Che holds her own to do battle, Le’mer hold’st his to defend his self. Our stance is different, as is the meaning behind our resolves. Young scholar, you travel like a bug searching for someone lost to them. Someone important to you has gone, but ‘che knows you will find them. Me’hon.” For the second time, Quirrel’s underlying purpose for being on this journey had been noticed by another. Was it that obvious to those around him that he was seeking another? Even now, he still didn’t know whether he was chasing a mere dream or something more tangible across these landscapes.

They continued on in silence, climbing over piles of fungus and heading further and further down into the spore-filled caverns until soon, they began seeing the telltale signs of civilization. Long spears embedded in the ground were left in places where they could be easily seen, the remains of various beasts adorning their blades like macabre decorations. If he looked closely, Quirrel could almost imagine the size of the creatures that had been defeated by the skilled warriors. It was terrifying to think about.

Upon reaching the first post, Ze’mer stopped just before it, barely skimming the edge of the invisible line that separated the rest of the caverns from the mantises’ territory. With a short

bow, she appraised him. “Good luck on your quest, Le’mer. ‘Che senses that you will need it.” Even as her words shook him deeply, he returned the bow in thanks and turned to depart when a short, pale mantis came flying over the ledge so fast that he hadn’t a single chance to react as she rushed past him and flew straight into Ze’mer’s arms. To his surprise, the knight embraced her and stepped back if only to give her space to breathe. “Lily-! Nai, dear love, what is wrong?” The mantis- Lily, wasted no time in pulling her further away from the boundary, fear evident in her movements.

“Ze’mer! My darling, you must go! We must both go! You- you over there!” She gestured wildly at Quirrel, who was still motionless with shock. “You have to leave! Oh, he’s gone mad! He’ll kill you both- please, we have to flee!” Her voice was frantic as she struggled to drag the much taller bug away from the mantis village’s entrance. As the knight attempted to soothe her panicked lover, Quirrel became aware of a terrible noise that was quickly drawing nearer as whatever it was that had terrified Lily so approached them. Running over to the two, he tried to alert Ze’mer to the danger as well.

“Actually, I think she has a point. We probably should leave before-!” His voice was cut off when a roar of pure rage sounded from nearby.

“*LILY!* ” Although it was said in their language, there was an edge to the sound that was primal and unnatural. It thrummed through the air and awoke something inside Quirrel that made him want to *run flee escape*. Now properly aware of the threat, Ze’mer pushed both Lily and Quirrel behind her and drew her weapon, standing her ground with all the grace and preparedness of a hardened warrior. The three waited as the sounds of destruction drew closer to them, yet they all gasped with barely concealed horror when a large mantis climbed over the ridge and screamed in a way that stunned them momentarily before charging directly forward, its claws primed to strike.

With a yelp, Quirrel felt himself lifted up and away from danger, Lily taking them both out of range as Ze’mer clashed with the infected being. As soon as he was set down high above the conflict, he scrambled to peer over the edge of the cliff they’d taken refuge on in an attempt to see the battle below.

“What is that thing she’s fighting?” Quirrel gasped as one of the infected mantis’ claws nearly grazed Ze’mer’s side, with only a quick strike from her nail driving it back enough to avoid grievous harm.

Lily landed beside him and trembled with worry at the sight of her lover in peril, barely managing to squeak out a “That *thing* is my father!” before letting her legs collapse beneath her. “Oh, this was a mistake. A horrible mistake! He’ll kill her, or she’ll kill him! Oh, oh I can’t bear it! This is all my fault-!” Covering up her face with her claws, Lily wailed while Quirrel attempted to comfort her, torn between wanting to help and wanting to keep an eye on the fight still happening beneath them.

“Th-there there... I’m sure everything will be fine.” If only he could believe his own words. Casting another glance at the two fighting bugs, Quirrel noticed the arrival of five more individuals on the scene. “Look! Reinforcements!”

Three of them were tall, lithe mantises with a resemblance to the beast they were chasing after. Each one wielded a thin, elegant nail-lance, and once they'd caught up to the furious best, Ze'mer fled with haste as the newcomers trapped her foe behind their weapons. However, Quirrel's focus wasn't on them. Accompanying the trio was a pair of bugs much shorter than the mantises. In the back of his mind, Quirrel could have sworn he'd seen the two before, as one with a red cloak and scarf rushed forward to join the fray, while the second one-

Noise filled his mind as his eyes focused on the short, gray cloaked bug that had yet to move toward the infected mantis. In only a few moments, they were dashing towards the enraged being, their nail- an immaculate weapon from what he could see -flashing with each strike. Soon, sooner than expected, Lily's father crashed to the ground with a growl that had the plates of Quirrel's shell shaking. Once he was restrained by the others, the smaller bug withdrew a shining talisman from beneath their cloak which sparked to life in a way that had him mesmerized before they struck forth at the beastly mantis.

In a single moment, the very air around them began to tremble. Quirrel's heart seemed to stop as a distant screaming echoed in his mind. Clutching his head, he waited for the onslaught to cease, and in an instant, the world seemed to settle once more.

Opening his eyes, he saw Lily's vision glazed over as she looked down at the scene below them. Turning to look as well, Quirrel once again caught sight of the gray-cloaked bug. Their gaze- tinted with orange and sending waves of fear through his body -burned through him while his breath caught in his throat. He didn't understand. He'd seen them before, but at the same time, he *hadn't*. How could he have known them? He didn't know them! It wasn't possible, and yet-

" *...again! I suppose you've... of strangers ... sickness in the air that... some words of advice ...may prove inadequate...*"

All at once, the pressure became too much, and with a choked gasp, Quirrel fell to the ground and let the darkness swallow his thoughts.

"-s he okay? He was watching the fight and then, oh, he started shaking terribly and then collapsed! Poor thing..." Quirrel awoke to a sensation akin to having an elder baldur lying on his head.

With a somewhat pained groan, he lifted himself partially off the ground before he was pulled into a sitting position by someone else. As he waited for his vision to clear up, he tried to inquire as to what had occurred during his momentary bout with unconsciousness.

"What- what happened while I was-?" Quirrel felt the world tilt, his saving grace being a steady hand on his shoulder while he gathered his bearings. When the blurriness receded, the bug with a red scarf and cloak from before was standing in front of him. "My apologies, I don't know what came over me just now."

“You have nothing to apologize for. Are you well enough to stand on your own?” Gazing at her outstretched hand, Quirrel let the taller bug help him stand, his legs wobbling for a moment before he steadied himself.

“I believe so. You have my thanks, stranger.” The other bug tilted her head at him and looked away. “Oh! You were the one fighting- wasn’t there another with you-?” He turned to look around and jumped back when he realized the shorter bug was beside him, watching him with a blank stare. “A-ah, there you are.” Quirrel hoped that the unease he felt hadn’t reached his voice.

“Oh, you’re alright! Blessed be the light, I was quite worried.” A fluttering of wings alerted him to Lily’s presence. “These brave bugs stopped my father’s rampage and cured his madness. My Aunts are escorting him to his chambers as we speak.” Tittering softly, Lily turned to the other two bugs. “My tribe and I will be forever in your debt. But now that you've recovered, I really must be on my way. Ze’mer has already gone to our meeting place, and I don’t wish to keep her waiting. Thank you once again, kind travelers, for the service you have bestowed upon us today. We won’t forget it.” Lily swept into a deep bow, and Quirrel watched as both the odd bug and their red-cloaked companion reciprocated before the young mantis hurried off in search of her lover.

“Hm, I suppose I’m finally on my own now.” Reaching for his weapon, he was relieved to find it still attached to his hood. “Though my original plan of visiting the Mantis’ Village will obviously have to be postponed in light of...recent events.” A short giggle caught him off guard as the bug in front of him held up a hand to stifle her laughter.

“It appears that my sibling and I have interrupted your travels. Though, it is perhaps for the best. One such as yourself would be better off not wandering in the territory of warriors.” Quirrel tried not to feel insulted at her words, yet he bristled with indignity regardless of whether she was well meaning or not. “I’m sure you know of the illness seeping through the cracks of this world. Instead of chasing after specters, you should go someplace where you’re less likely to have another brush with death.”

Before he could even begin to form a retort against her rebuttal, the bug swept her sibling under her arm and shot away on her needle and thread, the pair quickly becoming a speck in the distance. Glancing at the spot where the bug dressed in grey had been, Quirrel tried to remember just what it was that’d caused him to black out. Something about their appearance was familiar, yet in a way that had him searching not his memories, but his dreams. He’d seen them before, somewhere, though he still couldn’t remember-

Pushing aside his thoughts, Quirrel shook his head. “Well, I won’t get my answers standing around here waiting for them to come to me.” Pulling out his map, he began to plot a course to Deepnest.

Chapter End Notes

im dying, squirtle

Chapter 17: Ghost 08

Chapter Summary

This was quite a lackluster reunion lets be real.

Chapter Notes

surprise! one more chapter before i vanish for weeks again

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lord Kieza's mind was a mess of pulsating orange, with thorny vines made of infection wrapped tightly around the edges of the ground Ghost stood upon. The mantis himself was at the center of the mess, watching them silently, and Ghost found themselves unsurprised that the vines themselves weren't touching him.

"I made this choice on my own, little one, and now you would seek to undo it?" Before they could respond, an unearthly voice that was not their own echoed out of them.

"They do not, but I am taking back what is rightfully mine." Ghost shuddered as the old light within them reached out to reclaim her power. They could see the faint outlines of her wings extending from their body to curl around Kieza and *pull.*

The mantis lord shuddered and let out a brief howl of pain as the infection was torn from him forcibly, the orange wisps of power sinking into the imprint of the higher being around them before the dream crumbled apart around them, the vines dulling and withering away into nothingness.

When Ghost woke beside the felled body of Lord Kieza, they reached for that burning part of themselves and prodded at the Radiance, who rumbled quietly at the disturbance.

You didn't let me cleanse him, why? they asked, confused by her actions.

"Separating that which has no right being combined is easy. It is separating those so thoroughly enmeshed with her power that is difficult," she hummed, her voice oddly soft in their mind. *"Those who sought to give their minds to Her became more Her than themselves. You would not be able to free them of such bindings on your own, Little Shadow. When the time comes, she will assist in calling back those petulant pieces."* With that, she sank back into the recesses of their being, just out of their reach.

It was more than strange, communing with such an ancient and powerful being while knowing that she was- at least for the moment -a part of themselves. Yet, Ghost supposed it was useful and much better to have the old light as an ally instead of an enemy.

Turning their attention back to their surroundings, they immediately felt a slew of memories rush forward to overtake their thoughts. When they'd entered the cavern in pursuit of Lord Kieza, they'd felt something warm, something familiar.

Following their instincts for the time being, Ghost's limbs moved on their own, every part of them screaming out to *hurryhurryhurry* as they climbed upwards while Hornet spoke with the remaining Mantis Lords. Although it was a surprise to see Lily still in the cavern, all Ghost could think of was the being lying in front of them. After what felt like an eternity, they were finally reunited with Quirrel once more. The young mantis was fretting over him, but when they kneeled down next to him, they could already sense that he was fine if not unresponsive.

There was a measure of happiness that they couldn't help but feel even as they watched over his unconscious form. They had so many questions they wished they could ask that they knew he wouldn't have an answer for. After all, he wasn't *their* Quirrel. Not in this time, at least. That didn't mean they didn't *want*-

Once he began to stir they quickly stepped out of the way. They wanted to give him his space, but at the same time, there was an innate urge to reach out for the other bug. Soon after their departure from the group below, Hornet caught up them and moved to help Quirrel to stand. They felt a pang of sadness somewhere in their chest when he saw them and flinched, unease apparent in his stance. When Hornet grabbed them, they'd been stunned into inaction just long enough for her to swing them both out of range. While they didn't mind being carried by their sister, they couldn't help resent the fact that she'd prevented them from getting to be with Quirrel longer.

As it was, they couldn't rush back to him now. They had to return to Deepnest and retrieve their kin now that their deal with the mantises was complete. With Hornet's help and the mantises' assistance in staving off the wild creatures of Deepnest's outskirts, Ghost carefully ferried all four of their siblings out of the dark wilds and into the relative safety of the fungal wastes. Each vessel scanned their surroundings in awe while Ghost kept up the rear, the mantises bowing as the group passed.

Upon returning to the heart of the mantis territory, the five vessels were welcomed by a somewhat-refreshed Lord Caria, who bowed in thanks to both Hornet and Ghost. It took little effort to conceal their surprise when she leaned down to present them both with the mantis tribe's signature charm before stepping back to let their four siblings explore their new temporary residence. Once the other four were distracted, Hornet turned to the second oldest Mantis Lord.

"Thank you for your graciousness, Lord Caria." she said, sweeping into a short bow. When she stood again, Lord Caria tilted her head slightly with acknowledgment, her arm crossed over her chest in a sign of respect.

“No, it is us who should be thanking you. You’ve done our tribe a great service. With your help, our brother will recover from this blight, and we mantises shall remain strong in the face of the pale one’s encroachment. In return, we shall watch over these little ones until the time comes for you to retrieve them once more. You honor us, travelers.” With one last look, the Mantis Lord leaped away. Ghost saw Hornet glance after her, their sister’s gaze lingering on the place where Lord Caria was last visible, before turning back to them.

“We should be going. News of this incident will spread, and it would be foolish to linger here if we want to avoid endangering them.” she gestured to the excited vessels as they continued to investigate their surroundings. Although they still wanted more time with their siblings, Ghost knew they had to leave, if only to protect the family that they’d only just rediscovered.

With a nod, they turned to wave at their siblings. As it was, only the tallest of them- *Crest,* they’d called themselves -was paying enough attention to their surroundings to notice and wave back, but even that brief interaction made them feel the slightest bit lighter as they began the climb out of the village with Hornet at their side.

Overlooking the acid filled pools that made up the edge of mantis territory made them want to travel to the foggy canyon that lie just beyond the wastes to the rest. However, there was something- or rather, someone they needed to find first. Kneeling on the peaty ground, the pulled out their map and held it up for Hornet to see. It wasn’t completely accurate now due to Hallownest being much different in the present time than it was in the future, but Cornifer’s skilled work still had its uses. Pointing at a spot far below them, they projected a sense of urgency outwards.

‘ *Here, we need to go here. I need to find-!* ’ Slowly, Hornet pushed their hands away, her gaze searching their own briefly.

“You seek the broken one, do you not? The place where they were held is close to the palace grounds. Are you sure you want to do this when you fear attracting the king’s attention?” They hesitated for only a second before nodding. Ghost remembered fighting their sibling both times. The horror they’d felt upon facing the broken vessel, and the sorrow upon seeing them once more in the world of dreams- it was devastating. If they had a chance to prevent it from happening again, then they would give everything to try.

Hornet let out a short sigh at the sight of them rolling up their map and pointing downward. “Very well. It seems we shall be visiting our father’s dwelling sooner than planned. Lead the way, Ghost.” With a brief flap of their ethereal wings, Ghost leaped over a series of platforms and began to race down towards the very outskirts of the wasteland. Hornet kept close by, and once they were surrounded by familiar scenery, Ghost knew they’d found the right place.

Pipes jutting out of the wall before them poured excess water onto the already damp ground, and in front of them lay a gate. With little regard for propriety, Hornet jabbed her needle forward in between the gap in the doors. Even with both sibling’s efforts, the sections of the gate refused to separate until Hornet leaned forward, a flash of white shooting through her weapon before she pried the entrance apart with a shout. The doors stayed open just long enough for them to both slip past, the metal snapping shut behind them with a grating noise as the two of them headed forward into the dark.

Bewilderment almost stopped Ghost from pulling out their lumafly lantern, the light-giving object illuminating the path ahead of them as they traversed the dripping landscape. Hornet's constant presence kept them from feeling the sense of unease that plagued them back when they first explored the kingdom's waterways, yet their surprise at her previous action left them somewhat stunned. Had she always been able to channel soul through her weapon? Perhaps they'd never noticed in the heat of battle before.

In the solace of the tunnels, there was nothing but the sound of their footsteps echoing down the empty walkways to accompany their thoughts. Except, at some point, the noise of two bugs walking became four.

It only took seconds for the siblings to hide among the cracks and crevices of the walls and pipes, but a few seconds was all they had, for as soon as they were thoroughly hidden, two figures emerged from the gloom.

Approaching their hiding spots were the king's knights, Ogrim and Isma.

Chapter End Notes

we ll u hhhh see u all Next Month or smth hfkdjsl

Chapter 18: Ghost 09

Chapter Summary

lmao u THOUGHT

Chapter Notes

whoever gave her that title should revoke it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ghost made sure to keep their lantern covered by the folds of their cloak as the knights passed. Ogrim approached the entrance they'd just come from with some measure of hesitance as he lifted a claw to his face, his squinted gaze focusing on the scrapes that Hornet's nail had made on the door. In contrast, Isma seemed perfectly relaxed, the flowing greens of her cloak swaying as she stepped close to peer at what her companion was looking at.

"Someone has gotten into the waterways..." he muttered, before turning sharply and striking a valiant pose. "Come, my dear! We must find these intruders before they get too far!" Across from them, Ghost saw Hornet draw in a sharp breath as she folded herself even further into the crevice she'd chosen to hide in, pulling in her cloak so that the light from the knight's own lanterns wouldn't catch on the fabric. "Who knows what sorts of foul beasts might have slipped past our defenses! It is our duty as knights to-"

Before he could run off, Isma's arms curled around his shoulders, her mask angling towards him as she held him back. "You go on, I'll stay back here to see if they left anything behind." Ogrim visibly hesitated at her request, yet it only took a meaningful look from her to get him to acquiesce.

"Very well, I shall forge ahead!" He slipped out of her grasp and chuckled heartily before turning back towards her. "You will be careful, won't you?" He lifted a claw up to brush against her mask, his eyes tilting up into a smile when she patted it gently.

"Of course I will. Hurry now, before you lose them!" Isma waved as Ogrim hurried into the darkness, laughing all the way. Even when he was well out of sight she remained standing in the same spot he'd left her. Ghost wondered why she wasn't moving when her voice- formerly soft and reassuring -cut through the silence with a low tone of warning. "Being in the shadows, I feel your presence even if Ogrim does not. Where did you attain that piece of myself? I cannot remember ever giving it away, and yet-"

They jumped slightly when she turned to look in their direction, her mask obscuring her gaze. “Stranger, you are but an emptiness to me. Whatever ills you hold with this kingdom, I ask that you leave my fellow knight out of it. I shall distract him for as long as I can, but if we catch you in these waterways, I will show no mercy.” Ghost continued to shake even as Isma’s footsteps drew farther and farther away. They hadn’t been expecting the knight with the title of *Kindly* to be so-

“Hm, she is just as I remember her.” Hornet slipped out of her hiding spot and reached out to help pull Ghost out of their own space so they could resume walking. “What did she mean when she said you held a piece of herself?” Immediately, they were reminded of the strange fruit they’d received from Isma’s grave. Her tear gave them the ability to swim through Hallownest’s various acid pools, yet at the same time, it apparently held properties that they weren’t aware of until now.

Brushing off the unease, they reached into themselves and withdrew the object itself, its shining green surface glowing dimly in the lowlight. Hornet made a noise of understanding as they re-consumed the tear before pulling out their lantern once more.

“I never realized you received a gift from the lost knight, Ghost. Where did you find her?” It was only after they noted the carefree note in their sister’s voice that Ghost realized that she too must not have known the truth about Isma’s fate. Even Ogrim himself hadn’t realized it in their time, and he’d been dedicated to watching over her grove for years.

‘*I found her grave.*’ The sharp pang of grief from Hornet almost caused them to trip. ‘*It was the only thing left besides her corpse.*’

“So... even she fell in the end.” Ghost didn’t like the defeated note in her voice, but there was nothing they could think of that would help. Instead, the two siblings hurried through the tunnels, avoiding the various beasts inhabiting the waterways.

With each step they made, Ghost felt like they were moving closer and closer to the point of no return. They wanted to see their kin again, but more than that- they wanted to see them *alive*. But what if they weren’t? What if they reached the shadowy basin where the king resided and found the same destroyed, shattered husk that was in their time as well?

They didn’t realize that they’d stopped walking until Hornet spun around from several paces in front of them and returned to their side. She slipped the lantern out of their grip and grasped their hand tightly before pulling them along behind her. Once their lantern was hooked onto the eye of her needle, she began to lead the way.

“You let your thoughts consume you too often, Ghost.” Her words echoed slightly through the passageway. They glanced up to watch the light from the water below them reflect against their sister’s mask. “What happens will happen, stop spending so much time thinking about what could go wrong.”

‘*How did you-?*’ Before they could finish their thought, Hornet’s hand wrapped around one of their horns. She yanked them around a corner and held them tight against herself, the lantern swept beneath her cloak just as the king’s knights appeared once more. Ogrim looked

around with a narrowed gaze, and the two siblings shrunk back when Isma's mask began to shift in their direction.

Thankfully for them, she was distracted when her partner called her away. As soon as they were far enough out of sight, both Hornet and Ghost fled their hiding spot and broke into a run.

It was difficult, racing through the tunnels with only a single light to guide them, but they didn't want to risk getting caught by either knight. Ghost couldn't help but wince every time a splash was made from one of their footfalls. The sounds themselves bounced off the walls and into the dark as they forced themselves to keep up with Hornet's elongated stride.

Soon they reached a familiar fork in the road. Ghost felt the urge to pull out their map once more to consult it for reference when the heavy sound of armor reached them. In a moment of panic, they forcefully projected towards Hornet. ' *Go up!* ' their thoughts screamed as they used their mantis claw to cling to the slick stone walls. While they jumped from platform to platform, Hornet's needle shot past them as she slung herself upwards, her cry of *"Hurry!"* urging them to move faster as Ogrim's familiar shouting drew closer.

When they reached the top of the room and looked down, Ghost caught a glimpse of the two knights standing where they'd just been mere seconds ago. Not daring to pause and give the pair even more of a chance to catch up, they launched themselves after Hornet and slid down the wall into the next room. Their feet took them across the oddly familiar space before they were forced to stop in front of a dead end. With a sinking dread, they realized they were trapped.

"Ghost! Why did you lead us here! There's nowhere for us to go!" Hornet's whispered shouts only served to make them panic harder. The knights would reach them soon if they didn't-

The wall! Break it! Be free! Escape!

Without thinking, Ghost withdrew their nail and struck at the wall behind Hornet with as much strength as they could. Cracks began to show in the rock, but their weapon wasn't strong enough to completely break through the barrier. When they glanced back, they could see the silhouettes of Ogrim and Isma growing closer.

In one last desperate attempt for freedom, they summoned the energy of both shade and soul from the depths of their being. Feeling the strength of the void coursing through them, they stepped back and charged forward. Hornet's cry of surprise was obscured by the sound of stone breaking apart beneath the full force of the spell. As soon as they'd recovered from the aftershocks, they scrabbled to fit through the hole they'd made in the wall, with Hornet following after them.

The destroyed elevator shaft was in a better state than it was in their time, but it was still in disrepair, with the formerly broken lift suspended ominously over the room. However, they had no time to think of its unfinished state as they focused on avoiding the shrapnel and scaffolding left from the project. Once Hornet was free from the tunnel, she rappelled down and joined them in hiding beneath a wooden platform.

“Gah! We’ve been outsmarted! And look at this, destruction of the King’s property! I’m ashamed to even call myself a knight...” The siblings held each other close as the knight’s voices drifted down from the hole above them.

“Look, at least they aren’t in the waterways anymore. We can patch up this hole together before anyone sees.”

It was a tense few moments where all Ghost heard was the shifting of rock- which was sometimes accompanied by a hearty laugh -until the noise stopped. Slowly, they let go of their tight grip on Hornet’s cloak and relaxed with a sigh. After a brief respite, the two stood and began the treacherous descent down the rest of the elevator shaft.

There was no turning back now.

Chapter End Notes

kindly isma more like killer isma

Chapter 19: Ghost 10

Chapter Summary

Ghost Goes Back Home (and it still sucks)

Chapter Notes

hi kids

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Ghost, there were few places in Hallownest that lacked in wonder. The lush foliage of Greenpath, the solemn quiet of the Resting Grounds, and even the creeping shadows of Deepnest all held their own form of natural beauty. However, there were always places that unsettled them to their very core. Places like the Basin. It was an empty, depressing mass that left them with chills every time they so much as thought about it, but they had to go there for the sake of the ones they wished to save.

As soon as they reached the bottom of the elevator shaft, the familiar shadowy motes began to appear in the air around them. In a very strange and ironic sense of amusement, Ghost found it humorous how the Wyrm- a being who strived to be a light for all bugkind -insisted on surrounding himself with darkness during the latter parts of his reign. When they'd first visited, the suffocating atmosphere of the place dulled their senses and made them restless in a way none of the other parts of the kingdom had. Now, they strode across the bridge that linked the rest of Hallownest to the King's domain with their head held high.

Hornet seemed oddly at ease walking beside them, yet if they focused hard on her presence they could feel her uncertainty lingering just below the surface of her mind. It was still unfamiliar for them to be able to sense her emotions, though at the same time it was comforting in a way, grounding them to the world through a familiar tether. She was stepping into the unknown with them, and they only had each other to rely on in the world of the past.

The pathway to the rest of the Basin was empty. Ghost remembered it being full of husks- both civilian and guards -on their previous visits, but now the air hung stale and dead around them. The closer they got to the heart of the chasm, the heavier their body felt.

It was with a sigh of relief that the two siblings found the Basin Tramway abandoned. Despite remembering the tram pass they held- Ghost decided that they would only use it as a last resort should things go south. The trams only went one way in two directions, and the one from the Basin only led to two places, with neither of them being particularly favorable

locations. They would rather not visit Deepnest again so soon, and the Kingdom's edge wasn't somewhere they wanted to be either. So, if they needed to make a hasty escape, their only two options would be to flee into the raining city above them, or-

"Ghost, we're here." Hornet's words shook them out of their planning as their focus returned to the world around them. Glancing around at the darkened landscape, Ghost shivered as the Basin's unsettling atmosphere sank into their very being. From within, they felt the Radiance rumble with displeasure, a sickly heat springing up in their chest as they descended even further into the gloom. Just below them was the sealed gate holding their siblings captive, and with a heavy heart, they knew their kin would be forced to wait even longer for their return.

Once they'd reached the bottom, Ghost tried to force themselves not to turn and gaze at the pathway leading to the castle, yet they couldn't help but glance back and embrace the seething hatred that burned within. That urge to run straight towards the King's domain sang out from deep inside their being, but they weren't ready. They knew they couldn't face the pale monarch alone without a plan, not unless they wanted to once again be cast to the bottom of the pit they'd crawled out from centuries ago.

Several retainers emerged from the direction of the castle grounds, and before they could give in to the innate urge to attack those bearing the mark of the king, Hornet's arm caught theirs in a tight grip.

"Not now. We came here for a reason, yes?" They nodded their head sharply and tore their sights away so they could proceed.

The hallway before their sibling's prison was covered from ceiling to floor in gleaming spikes that protruded from the walls like the teeth of some great beast. They knew how to cross the chasm, but ultimately, they weren't forced to utilize the powerful energy of the crystalline heart they held. Instead, they watched as Hornet leaned down slightly before them.

"Climb on, I can get us across." They had no time to hesitate as they reached up and wrapped their arms around her neck, clinging tightly to their sister as she threw her needle into the distance, the sharp noise of the weapon connecting with something ringing loudly. After a few experimental tugs on the thread, she lifted them both up and swung partway across the gap before she forcefully pulled out the needle from its current hold and tossed it once more in a single, fluid motion.

Ghost had never experienced anything like the way how she whipped through the air before, but they knew that this was likely how she traveled so quickly across Hallownest without being stopped. As they held on to her, they couldn't help but marvel at her strength. Their sister was a force to behold.

Soon enough, the breath-taking ride was over as Hornet made one last flip to the other side of the hallway, her feet hitting the ground with a light thump as Ghost slid off her shoulders-dazed.

"I suppose I should have warned you first," she began, before dissolving into a light giggle as Ghost stumbled in front of her. "It can be somewhat jarring the first time around." Her hands

settled on their shoulders, steadying them for a moment before letting go.

With a quick breath, Ghost found themselves stable once more. Nodding in thanks, they continued down the path.

Before, the hall had been sealed up, with the only accessible path to their Broken sibling's cage being infested with mawlurks and lightseeds. Now, the way down was dim. No glowing sacs of infection clung to the walla, no lightseeds scuttled out of the cracks and crevices in the aged stone, and no whispers of suffering echoed out of the very earth itself. Absentmindedly, Ghost batted aside a few shadow crawlers with their nail as they approached the cavern.

Through the darkness, they could see the reflection of something at the other end of the room. Before Hornet could step forth, they held up an arm to stop her movement.

'Please understand... I need to face them alone.' With a nod of acquiescence, she moved back and perched by the wall.

"I will not impede you here, Ghost. But if I sense the need for action, I will not hesitate." Her words rang out against the deadened air, and Ghost tilted their head in understanding.

After projecting their thanks to their sister, they drew their weapon and stepped into the room.

Chapter End Notes

winky face emoji

Chapter 20: Ghost 11

Chapter Summary

Brokey Acquisition

The chamber where they'd last faced their kin was almost exactly the same as before. Yet, without the pulsing masses of infection covering the room, the place seemed even more dead than they remembered. Within them, the Radiance hummed with intrigue as they approached.

Across from them was the Broken Vessel, the second one of their kind that they'd found outside of the Abyss, and Ghost trembled as they took in their sibling's state. Their body was obscured by their cloak, but their mask- *their mask!* -relief sang out from the depths of their very being as they realized it was blessedly whole and unfractured.

Holding their weapon at their side, Ghost approached them slowly. Although they wanted to believe that their sibling would recognize them, they knew there was always a chance of things going wrong. They didn't want to be caught off guard, but they wouldn't use their nail against them if they didn't have to.

The closer they drew to the other vessel the more they shook, until they could barely take another step without succumbing to the tremors in their shell. Once they were right in front of their sibling, Ghost kneeled before them.

'...Hello?' The question rang out emptily through their mind without a response. *'Are you there?'*

Ghost watched as their body slumped forward even more until their horns were brushing.

's m a l l e s t o n e...'

With a gentleness they didn't know they possessed, Ghost reached out for their sibling, searching for their hands beneath their cloak until they could grasp them tightly.

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry I took so long.' Holding back the tears they wished they could shed, Ghost reached for the dream nail- the shining blade bursting to life in the darkness -and swung.

'I'm here now.'

Blinded by the light in front of them, Ghost covered their eyes with one arm and waited for the spots in their vision to clear. When it was safe to look again, they glanced at their

surroundings with barely restrained horror.

Their sibling's mind was a mess of gleaming white chains, the restraints covering nearly every section of visible space. The darkened black of void was wrapped up in the glowing seals, each link engraved with a familiar crest that sent a rush of anger straight through them.

And, at the center of it all, was *Them.*

Ghost reached out for their sibling even as they were surrounded by chains of every kind. Only their head was free, yet all they could do was look up from where their body was held, their empty eyesockets pleading.

'Who did this to you?' Ghost asked, even though they already knew the answer to their question. The other vessel's head lolled back, a soft cry of agony echoing throughout the chamber as they tried to respond.

'Father... promised... us....said..we would.. be...set free...' they whispered, pain in their voice as they strained against the chains holding them back. *'We failed… we failed and.. there was…. nothing we could do….'*

Drawing the dream nail once more, Ghost began slicing through their restraints. It was heartachingly reminiscent of when they'd shattered the restraints that kept Pure locked within the Black Egg, but with each swing, more and more of the glowing links broke apart. Satisfaction bloomed within them as the pieces fell away before dissolving in the restless darkness below, their surroundings growing increasingly dark as they tore the chains away from their sibling's mind.

They didn't know how long they spent hacking apart the seals, but at one point, the ground beneath their feet began to rumble. Casting their gaze back to the center of the room, they gasped as they watched as the black around them was drawn into their sibling. Their entire frame became saturated with shadows, and soon, the remaining lights all crumbled away, swallowed up by the limitless dark. Ghost couldn't remember sheathing the dream nail, but they must have, because the next thing they knew, they were wrapped up in their sibling's arms, holding the other vessel tightly as their shoulders shook with silent laughter.

'*You didn't need to apologize. I knew you'd come for me eventually.*'

Ghost awoke with Hornet at their side. A brief glance revealed that their sibling was safe, though their body hung limply in Hornet's arms.

"Whatever you did in their dream, it exhausted them thoroughly. We need to go-" Ghost held a hand up, the unspoken *wait* hanging in the air. Pointing behind her to the pathway leading beyond the cavern, they stood and tugged lightly on her cloak.

Silently, the two of them traveled down into the room behind the arena, until they were both standing before the Monarch's Shrine. Ghost recognized the familiar glowing motes in front of them, and reached out for their sibling. Hornet deposited them into their arms, and Ghost

marveled at how little they weighed briefly before lifting them up in front of the shining lights. There was a brief flash as the floating objects all congregated around them before vanishing in a short burst. Ghost already retained their wings, and it was only fair that their kin was repaid for the suffering they'd endured by taking away that valuable part of their father entirely.

Distantly, Ghost wondered if the Pale King realized how foolish it was to give up such a piece of himself. With the deed done, Hornet leaned down to take their body back into her grasp before they hurried out of the room. Ghost rushed over the empty landscape, jumping over shadow crawlers before they reached the spike covered chasm once more. Though this time, Hornet already had her arms full with their sibling.

"I can carry them across, but you-" Ghost waved her away.

'Go on, I can cross on my own. I've done so before.' She watched them before nodding slowly and slinging her needle across the room once more. As soon as the two were out of sight, Ghost drew up the energy of the crystal heart from within themselves. The familiar shards of energy grew around their feet, and with a burst of light, they were shooting through the air.

Upon reaching the platform on the other side, they ceased their channeling and dropped to the ground. Once they climbed back up into the main hub, they were unceremoniously pulled up behind a wall by Hornet, who pointed behind her to where several retainers were standing. Ghost watched as the group milled about, its occupants looking confused, before shouts began to ring out. Soon, they were all hurrying towards where their sibling had been held.

As soon as the retainers were all out of sight, Hornet and Ghost both rushed back the way they came, their reclaimed sibling clutched dearly in Hornet's arms even as they hurried for safety.

Once they'd made it back to the tramway, they stopped to rest before noises from below started coming closer. With a panicked glance at Hornet, they began climbing once more. Running across the bridge, they tried not to look back in case the retainers were behind them, but once they were in the elevator shaft, there was nowhere else to go except-

'*Hold on to me!* ' they cried out mentally. With a panicked glance, Hornet wrapped an arm around them reflexively even as the crystalline light began to build around them. Just as the other bugs breached the room, all three of them went shooting upwards in an unstable arc, with Hornet shrieking in surprise.

Once they were far enough above the retainers, Ghost canceled the spell, their tiny group dropping a short distance to land on one of the wooden platforms. Below them, the king's servants began clamoring for a way to reach them, even as they searched for a way out. Looking up, Ghost felt a tremor of uncertainty wrack their body as they spotted the wall they'd just broken through a short time ago, the hole in the stone hastily repaired with spare materials.

It would be risky, but their only other option was to traverse through the City of Tears. At the thought of having to avoid so many other bugs while also carrying their comatose sibling,

Ghost shuddered. They couldn't chance it.

While Hornet recovered from the shock, Ghost climbed up to the broken wall and slammed into it with a burst of void-tainted soul. The stone came crumbling away once more in face of the onslaught, and as they turned to beckon their sister upward, they found her already leaping towards them with their sibling held against her chest.

"Some warning back there would have been nice," she snapped. This time, it was Ghost's turn to laugh silently as they crawled through the hole. "Next time, you tell me before you do something so sudde- *ah!"* Ghost jumped at her cry of surprise before freezing when they felt the pointed tip of a nail against their back.

"I thought I told you *never* to let me catch you here again."

Oh. Oh no.

Chapter 21: Quirrel 04

Chapter Summary

Bean Boy Visits Spider Hell

Chapter Notes

thus marks the beginning of the second quarter of this fic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although he'd just crossed the mushroom-infested land, Quirrel tried not to be discouraged as he endured another difficult trek through the fungal wastes in search of a way into Deepnest. As soon as he'd found the place where there was rumored to be a path to the far-off kingdom, the ground crumbled away beneath him. It was only thanks to his reflexes that he was able to use his nail to catch himself on the wall, the tempered blade granting him a slow descent to the bottom of the pit.

Once he'd reached the ground, he took a brief moment to glance upward at the hole he'd fallen through. Barely any light shone down from the gap in the cave ceiling, and there was an eerie skittering noise that seemed to echo from everywhere at once, but as soon as he'd recovered from the descent, a new sense of wonder overtook his timidity.

Deepnest was a dark and terrifying place for even the bravest of bugs, yet Quirrel found himself free of worries as he traveled through the dimly lit caverns with one of Monomon's special lanterns held aloft in front of him. The luminous jelly being within the glass sphere didn't shine quite as bright as a lumafly did, but its glow cast farther over the landscape, allowing him to see obstacles in front of him before they became too much of an issue.

Although he didn't know quite what he was doing in the spider-ruled territory, he knew that he wanted to at least get a chance to meet the Queen of the realm. Herrah the Beast's reputation was enough to make him look forward to encountering her, despite all the danger he knew he was at risk for the moment he went looking for an entrance to her domain.

Pulling his cloak tighter around himself, Quirrel shivered as he stepped over the unsteady ground. Deepnest was frequently described as cold and frightening by travelers- or rather, by those that survived wandering its twisting pathways. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Quirrel knew that he should probably be at least a little more concerned for his own safety, yet that part was obscured by the curiosity and intrigue that consumed his thoughts as he observed his surroundings.

It wasn't until he remembered how long he'd been wandering alone that he noticed he hadn't encountered another being- bug or beast alike -since falling into the chasm. While any other might have seen this as a warning sign, Quirrel only desired to see some other sign of life among the darkened caverns.

Soon enough, his unspoken wishes came true when he soon noticed a deep rumbling among the earth. Glancing to the side, he was startled to find a massive armored bug crawling towards him with no sign of stopping. Its mandibles gnashed violently as its claws carved out the walls around its armored body, and with a yelp, Quirrel was forced to retreat before it got close enough to crush him in its jaws.

Hopping into a gap in the rock below the path of the beast, Quirrel only had the briefest moment to relax before another came up behind him. Soon, he found himself scrabbling to escape the tunnels. Each time he evaded one, his next place of escape would have another coming towards him. Quirrel was exhausted by the time he finally rolled out of the garpede nest. His cloak was covered in dust from the massive beasts' digging and it took a while for him to catch his breath.

"Well, I came here seeking adventure, but I certainly wasn't expecting adventure to come charging toward me in such a way." Quirrel laughed nervously to himself for a moment before lying back down on the ground with a tired sigh.

"Then surely you must know, most bugs don't come down here seeking much else but their deaths." A soft voice drifted out of the dark, and Quirrel jumped to his feet with a start. "Now what beings a kingdom bug like yourself to my domain? Or should I say, what brings *another* kingdom bug out of the safety of your pale-ruled lands and into my kingdom? Do you come bearing important news as well? Because if not, then I see no reason to prolong the inevitable."

There was the unmistakable sound of a heavy weapon being drawn and Quirrel pulled out his own nail reflexively despite knowing it was unlikely that it'd be able to do him much good against a much larger adversary. Watching the place where the shadows were darkest, to his combined delight and horror, the massive frame of Herrah the Beast came stalking into the cavern.

Dropping his nail, Quirrel fell to his knees before her, his heart pounding in his chest. The Queen of Deepnest was much bigger than he was expecting, but he couldn't help but tremble with awe at the sight of the powerful being in front of him.

"Qu- *Queen Herrah of Deepnest*! I didn't mean to intrude upon your lands. I came here seeking answers-!" His voice dissolved into a squeak when she stepped closer, the intimidating six-eyed mask looming over him. "You mentioned others have been here before me. Were there two of them- one in red and another in grey?" Quirrel let out a breath of relief when she moved her nail out of the way, before falling on his back when she leaned down into his space, her gaze boring into him.

"You've met the skilled travelers? How interesting." With a fluid movement, her massive weapon was put away and her legs folded under her body as she blocked the passageway

leading to the rest of Deepnest. “I shall humor you for a moment, kingdom dweller. Tell me what you know before I lose my already limited patience.”

Trying to ignore the dread building in his chest, Quirrel stood again and faced Herrah with what he hoped was a confident stance. “I met them at the border between Hallownest’s grounds and the lands ruled by the Mantis Lords. The one in the red cloak, I don’t believe she told me her name-” he forced out his words with false security dripping from his voice. In the silence that stretched out from his hasty confession, Herrah’s laugh echoed out into the chamber.

“The one in red, *Hornet*,” was he mistaken, or was there pride in her voice when she spoke the traveler’s name? “she and her sibling proved themselves quite useful to mine kin indeed. Though I must say, you are proving to be of very little importance to me. In fact, you bore me, kingdom bug. If you have nothing else to offer me, then, as recompense you can apologize for wasting my time by holding still. I promise I’ll make your demise swift.” With a yelp, Quirrel scrambled back as the Queen of Deepnest raised herself above him.

Quirrel knew he wouldn’t stand a chance against the skilled warrior that was Herrah, but when her nail was drawn and pointed at his shell, he couldn’t help but cry out. “Please! You can’t kill me! I’m not even a citizen of the kingdom, I’m a servant of The Teacher-!” His words broke away when her blade was but an inch from his throat, but he’d gotten her to pause at least.

“Why would that be important to m-” Before she could finish, Herrah stopped, bringing her weapon back to her side and tilting her head slightly. “Wait- that title... The Teacher you say?” Not trusting his voice to betray his weakness, Quirrel nodded rapidly. “Hm. It’s been quite a while since I’ve heard from her. Dearest Monomon is still maintaining her tomes I presume. And if you’re her servant, so she must have you running about collecting those little bits of knowledge she does so love to add to her collection.”

“Yes- yes, except I’m not here to research on her behalf. I’m here because she- she won’t let me back to the archive until I find what I’m looking for...” he said, dejectedly. “The King himself came to her with an offer-” Quirrel stopped abruptly when Herrah’s claws unexpectedly grasped his shoulders tightly.

“The Pale King,” she hissed. “He’s made her an offer? For what purpose? Tell me!” Herrah’s frantic plea struck him deeply. “Little Scholar, this is a matter of life and death. Tell me what that insufferable wyrm wants with my Monomon!”

“I don’t know!” he cried, all the insecurities from before the King’s parade returning to him in an instant. “He mentioned a seal, and she asked me if I would help her with its construction if she agreed to his request. Beyond that I don’t know a thing. She sent me away before we could come to a conclusion on what to do.” Quirrel’s hurried speech must have been enough for her, because soon he found himself released from her clutches.

There was a moment where he feared for his impending death, but instead of being struck down by Herrah’s weapon, she pulled out a strand of thread from beneath her cloak and deftly wove it into a shape that resembled her mask before handing it to him.

“Here, this mark will ensure your safe travels through my domain. It appears that I must make plans to see dear Monomon once more.” Herrah made a sharp turn and took a few steps before glancing back at Quirrel. “There is a plan unfolding outside of my reach, and although I know not what the wyrm plans to do with us, I will not let myself be caught off guard. Tread warily, Little Scholar, for there is more than an illness of the mind to fear in these times.” Her ominous words sent another stab of unease through him even as she vanished into the shadows beyond the garpede tunnels.

Still reeling, Quirrel took a moment to steady his breath and murmur a few soft words of reassurance to himself after the encounter. There would be worse dangers ahead, he figured, ones that couldn’t be reasoned with like the Queen had been, and he needed all his wits about him if he were to be able to make it through such trials. But he’d never find what he was searching for if he gave up so quickly. With that, Quirrel braced himself once more, and set off into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

im love bean man

Chapter 22: Ghost 12

Chapter Summary

Knight Fight!

Chapter Notes

warning: im bad at fight scenes

How Isma had attained the title of *Kindly,* Ghost didn't know. So far her demeanor could only be described as Utterly Terrifying, and when trapped between the frozen form of their sister and the trained nail of a seasoned warrior, they could only do one thing.

With a single warning glance at Hornet, they watched her slip back out of the hole in the wall before an unearthly wail tore itself from their body with devastating force. Isma was thrown back by the shockwave, granting them just long enough time to draw their own weapon and brace themselves before she charged forward. Their nails clashed, sparks dancing off the blades and skittering across the floor.

"I gave you a chance to avoid this fate, yet you decided to return here instead. What foolishness leads you to seek out death in such a way?" Isma taunted as she jumped back, her blade held at the ready. "Or are you here because you wish to test your prowess against one of the King's five great knights? No matter the reason, you and your companion shall both fall to my nail." Ghost was glad that Hornet wasn't in the room to see them fight, because they couldn't help but feel the slightest bit remorseful as they released a blast of soul from their chest and watched it slam into Isma, the spell leaving her stunned, the edges of her leaves singed from the attack.

While the knight was recovering from their unexpected attack use, Ghost rushed towards her. Putting every ounce of strength they had into their swing, they struck the blunt side of their nail against her own, knocking it out of her grasp. Gasping, she turned and tried to retrieve it, but with the aid of a shadow-enhanced dash they were able to reach it before she could and throw it across the room.

Pointing their nail towards her, they waited for her to make a move. To their relief, she stepped back out of range, allowing them the freedom to move.

Focusing their thoughts on Hornet, they called her back to the cavern. It was only a few moments before she was climbing back into the chamber, their sibling still cradled tightly in

one of her arms while she held up her needle in the other. As soon as she was able to stand up completely, she made sure to keep her weapon facing towards the knight before setting their still-unconscious kin down against the wall.

Glancing back towards Isma, Ghost shuddered as they realized they wouldn't be able to get past her without either incapacitating her, or somehow getting her away from their siblings. They were essentially stuck.

There were a tense few moments where no one in the room moved. The stillness was broken when Hornet- closest to Isma's nail as she was -drew the weapon close with her foot and deftly kicked it out of the hole in the wall, the sound of metal clanging against stone ringing out as it fell. Ghost couldn't smile, but as soon as the main source of danger was eliminated, a rush of excitement flooded them. Now that Isma was no longer capable of using her nail, they were-

Their brief mental celebration was cut short as a familiar form bounced into the room. Ghost took a reflexive step back as the shining white ball unrolled to reveal Ogrim, who let out a war cry as he barreled straight into them. Although they were used to pain, it was still an agonizing shock to feel their mask splinter upon impact. Glossy black fluid splattered across the floor when they landed, leaving them dazed as they tried to recover from the sudden onslaught.

Hornet's sharp cry had them jumping back to their feet as they twisted their head around to glance at her, ignoring the lingering pain. Although she was unharmed, she was attempting to fend off both Isma- who had apparently received a spare weapon while Ghost was distracted -and Ogrim at the same time.

Grasping their nail from where it had fallen, Ghost rushed towards the group. Although they didn't want to truly hurt either knight, they couldn't allow their siblings to be harmed.

Before her assailants could get any closer, Hornet unleashed a her signature thread flurry, the deadly strands whipping wildly around her body. Seeing their chance to move, Ghost dove forward and swung their nail towards Ogrim, their weapon glancing off the polished armor before they jumped back, having successfully gained his attention.

Old memories came flooding back as Ogrim began to bounce wildly in their direction. Each dodge, parry, and strike was reminiscent of the time where Ghost had fought the king's most loyal servant and won. But this was different. Now, Ogrim was in his prime, not yet a tired veteran warrior like he was when they'd dueled him. Though, if they had one thing to be thankful for during the fight, it was the fact that the room was blessedly free of anything that the knight could use to fight them with besides his own claws.

Those same claws were deftly parried again with their nail for what must have been the dozenth time before Ghost found an opening. After pushing Ogrim back with their weapon, his leg slipped into a crack, giving them a change to knock the stalwart defender on his back, his shout of distress drawing Isma's attention just long enough for Hornet to gain the upper hand in her own battle. The moment her guard dropped, the plantlike knight was overtaken, her nail knocked away once more as her limbs were tangled in thread.

Ghost's chest heaved with exhaustion as they gazed at the rest of the room's occupants. With both knights incapacitated for the moment, they let themselves drop to their knees, the cracks in their mask beginning to ache as the thrill of combat fled their body. A light touch on one of their horns alerted them to Hornet's presence, and they accepted her careful assistance back to where their sibling was just waking up after all the commotion.

Leaning back against the wall, Ghost sighed and began to channel soul through their wounds. It only took a few seconds before the gaps in their mask repaired themselves, the pain dulling as they reached up to scrub away the remnants of black fluid from their face. Watching as the knights struggled to right themselves once more, they couldn't help but feel just the slightest bit tired. Would the bulk of their journey be comprised of fighting with bugs they'd once known to be friends? Ghost hoped not.

Once they felt sufficiently recovered, they returned to their sibling's side, lifting the other vessel into their arms before hurrying out of the room with Hornet at their side. They couldn't avoid the knights forever, but until their sibling was strong enough to follow on their own, there was nothing else they could do.

Chapter 23: Hornet 05

Chapter Summary

Oh, Gross

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as they were able to get out of the infernal waterways of the kingdom, Hornet never wanted to return for any reason. She hated the damp cold of the pipes and the unsettling noise of water dripping down from above, but more than anything, she hated facing off against the king's knights. She'd seen the damage that Ogrim had caused Ghost, and she knew that although they were more resilient than most, they still hadn't grown into their shell.

While most bugs possessed a sturdy body protected by hardened chitin, Ghost was soft in comparison. Hornet had held them more since returning to the past than she ever had before, but she could remember what it felt like to carry their fragile body back when she'd been forced to rescue them from the wyrm's corpse. She couldn't recall ever seeing their shell break completely, but at this point she didn't even want to imagine it. Just the thought of void-black blood strewn across a room with pieces of their mask scattered everywhere-

Hornet felt a violent shudder ripple through her body as she picked up her feet, hurrying to keep up with Ghost's stride. There weren't many places to hide in the waterways, but they'd have to find someplace to stop to let their sibling recuperate from their earlier ordeal. As they headed back in the direction they'd first come, Hornet followed Ghost as they took a lower pathway, the tunnel curving below the path leading to the mantis village.

"Ghost, where are we going?" she asked, keeping her voice low. A strange sensation passed over her before she realized it was her sibling projecting to her again.

'Somewhere unfortunate...' When they replied, their thoughts were saturated with disgust.

Traveling deeper into the cavern, the pipes eventually cleared away to reveal heaps of garbage. Piles of destroyed furniture and other fixtures were all rotting away beneath the city's foundation. Hornet tried not to express her disdain for the state of her surroundings, but the deeper Ghost traveled into the murk, the less enthused she was.

Soon, small wormlike beings began to surface from the walls around them. With one arm still clutching their sibling, Ghost struck out at the larvae remorselessly with their nail. Hornet didn't know what the creatures were, but they'd obviously attained Ghost's ire in one way or another.

When the sound of footsteps began to echo from behind them, they ceased the excess violence and focused once more on running. Once they reached the end of the tunnel, they were forced to wade through the gloom until the room opened up in front of them. Upon glancing up, Hornet had to hold in her revulsion as she spied a massive, hanging... *thing* suspended from the ceiling. She had no time to focus on how repulsive the being was though, as the knowledge they were being followed forced her to swallow her sudden nausea and follow Ghost as they crossed the room, hiding in a small alcove carved into the stone wall. The space was just big enough for the three siblings to curl up in, with the water reaching up to Hornet's waist.

Soon, a series of bugs emerged from the tunnel they were just in on the opposite side of the room. Ogrim and Isma were among them, but Hornet was surprised to see several retainers and city guards making up the bulk of the group. When they arrived, she was amused to watch them all experience what must have been similar feelings to hers upon noticing the large, disgusting creature still hanging in the center of the cavern.

Although Ogrim looked visibly upset, Isma seemed to be nothing more than irritated at its existence. Soon the retainers began clamoring for some reason, before a repulsive slobbering noise started to echo out of the tunnel. All eyes became trained on the form above them as it convulsed and spat wildly, having been awoken from its apparent slumber by the commotion caused by the kingdom bugs below. Hornet gagged silently as it expelled a pair of flying, screaming infants from its body, the newborn creatures flying towards the crowd with their mouths open wide.

The shrieking larvae were swatted aside by both knights, but the onslaught only continued as the enraged beast began to churn out multitudes of its offspring into the cavern. In the back of her mind, Hornet could vaguely register Ghost expressing their own revulsion for the creatures.

'*Out of all the beasts and beings I've encountered in Hallownest, flukes are the worst.*' they griped. Their own hatred for the things overlapped with hers to the point where she couldn't figure out where their disgust ended and hers began.

Soon the cacophony echoing out of the chamber became so loud that Hornet's gaze was drawn back to the gaggle of bugs who were now panicking at the sheer amount of flukefey occupying the room. The offending infants swooped down to harass the group as Ogrim and Isma worked overtime to bat them away. Even the city guards were struggling to fend them off with their nails.

At some point, Isma's patience must have finally run out, because as soon as there was a gap in the swarm, she rushed forward to begin attacking the mother itself. Her nail pierced the beast's fatty hide before Ogrim himself leaped after her to attack it with his claws. After several strikes, the being screamed out as its life was thoroughly extinguished, its disgusting bulk shred to pieces under the knight's combined onslaught.

With the death of the flukemarm, the remaining flukefeys hovered in confusion before they fell to the rest of the guard's weapons. Hornet watched Ogrim inquire with his fellow knight quietly before the ringing sound of Isma's voice carried itself over the din of water flowing.

“As you can see, we’ve eradicated the source of the infestation. You may all return to your posts or continue to dispose of the remaining pests-” Her speech was interrupted by one of the retainers just long enough for her to point her weapon at their throat. “If anyone wants to question my judgement, you can stay, and we can discuss it with our nails.” The threat rang out loud enough for Hornet to see the retainer’s resulting shudder of terror, their head whipping from side to side in an obvious attempt to avoid conflict with the skilled warrior.

When the group was out of sight and hearing range, the siblings hesitantly exited their hiding space. Crossing the room, they deftly avoided the deflated corpse of the flukemarm from where it lay, and stepped back into the flooded corridor.

However, as soon as they emerged on the other side of the tunnel, Hornet let out a cry as she was snatched up by a pair of claws. Across from her, Ghost- and by extension, their sibling - were both tangled up in Isma’s vine-like hold.

“At last, your journey ends here, little shadow. You and your-” Isma glanced down at the two vessels in her arms before looking up at Hornet, “-your compatriots are going to be sentenced for trespassing on and damaging the King’s property.” With a hiss, Hornet twisted around so her needle was pointed against Ogrim’s armor, the sturdy metal splintering beneath the tip as she jabbed the weapon backwards viciously.

At the sound of her companion’s abrupt noise of pain, Isma made a half-lunge towards Hornet only to stop when she realized that the needle was embedded in the place where his shell split.

“You’re smart, knight. You know what will happen if my blade sinks in here. If you don’t want such a fate to befall upon him then you will Let. Them. Both. Go.” Hornet hated to act this way, but at the moment she had no choice. She couldn’t allow for them to hurt Ghost or their yet-unnamed sibling. What kind of sister would she be if she let tragedy befall them when she could do something about it?

When Isma didn’t move, Hornet dug her weapon in between the plates of Ogrim’s protective shell, tiny cracks spreading across the white of its surface as she twisted it into the gap. The knight made a strangled noise but remained still under her grip until Isma began to slowly withdraw her vines.

As soon as both Ghost and their sibling were free, Hornet prepared to pull away before the other vessel lifted its head and *screamed*.

The noise rattled through the tunnel’s occupants and Ghost attempted to reach out for them but was stunned by the sound. Hornet fell to her knees in agony as the shriek echoed in her mind, amplified through her and Ghost’s mental connection.

Try as she might to stand, Hornet was powerless against the unexpected onslaught, and the last thing she saw before her vision gave way to black was the sight of Isma reaching towards them.

Chapter End Notes

this was a painful chapter but anyways that's the end of my chapter burst for this month! see ya'll later when i rebuild the buffer i just smashed

Chapter 24: Ghost 13

Chapter Summary

alt title for this chapter: hornet's isma diss track

Chapter Notes

happy godmaster release day! have a bonus chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ghost woke to the unmistakable sound of bubbling acid surrounding them. As their awareness returned, the darkness filtered out of their vision as they tried to make sense of their surroundings. The first thing they noticed was that they were wrapped up uncomfortably tight by a tangle of vines. The next thing they noticed was that they were hanging upside down. A distant memory of being restrained by the husks in Deepnest came to mind before they dashed the thought away. It was uncomfortable then, and it was even more uncomfortable now. Glancing around at their surroundings they noticed Hornet in a similar situation, though unlike themselves, she appeared to be unconscious.

However, as they scanned the room, panic began to rise in their chest as they realized their other sibling was nowhere in sight. *Found* - the name rang out in their mind as they remembered, vaguely, their sibling screaming out before they were all taken -was missing and Ghost knew that if they'd all been captured by Isma and Ogrim, then there was enough of a chance that the two great knights had recognized them as vessels and-

A single void-enhanced wail ripped itself from their body, then another, and another, until their soul reserves were completely depleted. Ghost wanted to cry, or scream, or do anything at all to free themselves from the vines which had remained impervious to their spells, but they were completely incapacitated for the first time that they could remember. It was a terrible feeling, and even as Hornet began to stir beside them, they couldn't stop their body from convulsing with silent sobs.

"Ghost... *Ghost,* what.. ?" Hornet's voice was dull and raspy, but soon she realized where she was, and began twisting around violently in her restraints. "Ghost! What happened! Explain-!"

'Stop! Stop it!' they hissed mentally, *'look below us.'* Beneath the two siblings was a bubbling pit of acidic water with no solid land or exit in sight. '*There's nowhere for us to*

go.' With a deflated sigh, Ghost let themselves hang silently, trying not to let their emotions get the best of them. *'I'm sorry, Hornet... I failed y-'*

"Shut up," she snapped. "Blaming yourself for this situation is completely nonsensical. We couldn't have anticipated our sibling's reaction, and they wouldn't want you to think in such a way. Our story isn't over yet."

Ghost wasn't fully convinced, but they weren't given a chance to retort as the hissing liquid beneath them began to recede slowly, revealing wet stone beneath it. From the corner of the room, an opening appeared as the rest of the acid drained out of the room. Soon after, Isma was striding forth into the chamber, Found held aloft in her grip, which appeared to be anything but gentle. As her gaze lifted towards them, Ghost flinched back slightly, remembering what it felt like to be restrained by the knight's plantlike limbs. At the very least, they knew their sibling wasn't dead, with the other vessel's presence being faint but noticeable.

"You there, red one," Isma called out, not noticing how Hornet's stare became increasingly pointed as irritation poured off her in waves, "how did you come into possession of not one but *two* of the King's vessels? A common citizen shouldn't even know of the existence of these things much less be ferrying them about like pets-" Her speech was cut short by Hornet's sudden shout of anger.

"Hold your tongue when you speak of them, you foolish weed!" she bit out, rage lacing every word. It seemed that the former respect she'd held for the Great Knight had left her the moment said knight spoke ill of her siblings. "They belong to no one but themselves, and certainly not your loathsome king! You should be asking yourself whether not the king sees you as a pet yourself, seeing as you scurry about to please him as such!"

Her vicious taunts had Isma narrowing her eyes as she dropped Found to the floor unceremoniously, prompting Ghost to cry out silently as they struggled once more against the vines holding them aloft. They didn't know if their nail was still strapped to their back as it was more than likely that the two knights had stripped them both of their weapons, *however-*

'Hornet, Hornet! Do you still have your thread?' they projected their thoughts at their sister with an urgency that had her ceasing her verbal onslaught of the knight below them so she could twist to look at them. Unable to respond without catching Isma's attention, she nodded almost imperceptibly. *'In that case, we might still be able to get out of here in one piece. I wanted to inquire about this at a better time, but it seems that we won't have the chance. Try and distract Isma more, I will tell you what you have to do.'*

At their instructions, Hornet once again threw herself back into provoking the knight below them.

"It seems fit that you would ignore the obvious and consider these two to be lesser than you when your king supposedly holds you in high esteem, like how a tamer regards his loyal beasts until they are no longer useful to him!" her scathing words weren't extraordinary on their own, but with each line she spoke, Isma seemed to grow more and more impatient. "Free me from these bonds and let me show you what it's like to fight without a master to serve! Or are you worried that you'll be bested by a common citizen?"

At this, her bluff seemed to falter as Isma shifted to rest one foot on Found's mask, their head directly beneath her leg as she withdrew a nail from behind her back.

"Try as you might, I will not fall for your taunting. I have the upper hand here. You care about these things, I can see it in your eyes." With that, she pressed down hard on the vessel below her, the presence of their mind flaring into awareness at the sudden pain. Both Ghost and Hornet startled at the waves of panic emanating from their sibling, and Ghost only became more frantic as Found reached out one arm for them. "Tell me how you discovered them and I may grant you a swift end instead of a slow death by other means!"

With a shudder, Ghost realized they were out of time.

'Hornet!' they called out mentally.

"You don't have to tell me twice!" she replied, and with a bright flash, the threads she kept at her side burst to life, filled with soul and rending through the vines holding her up in an instant. Twisting her body midair, Hornet landed on her feet and dashed towards Isma, her threads flying as the knight stumbled back, not expecting the sudden retaliation. Thanks to her speed, she was able to overtake the plantlike bug quickly, divesting her of her weapon and throwing it with careful accuracy at the vines still tangled around Ghost.

As soon as they hit the ground, they rushed to Found's side while Hornet continued to fend off Isma.

'Get up, please! We have to go now! Hornet can't hold her off forever-' they projected, as their sibling reached up to grasp their arms. *'Found- did they hurt you? Can you stand?'* With a barely hidden wince, the other vessel stood on shaky legs, holding on to Ghost as the two hobbled towards the chamber's only exit.

'*The other, he will come for her, we can't escape-'* their thoughts pressed back against Ghost's mind, and as they tried to process what their sibling meant, their pathway out was blocked by an imposing figure in white armor, the bulk of Isma's fellow knight blocking the entrance.

"Isma! The prisoners are escaping!" Ogrim shouted, his claws raised for battle as Isma managed a huff of disbelief even when thoroughly occupied with fighting Hornet.

"I can see that, Ogrim! Don't let them get into the main waterways!" she called back. With a grunt of confirmation, the beetle lowered himself in preparation to attack. Ghost froze in place. They were without a weapon and they'd foolishly emptied their soul reserves only a few moments ago, for the first time in ages, they were completely defenseless.

However, if they couldn't retaliate, the least they could do would be to defend that which they'd come so far to save. Pushing Found behind themselves, Ghost stood in front of their sibling and threw their arms out, using their body as the only line of defense they could provide against the knight before them.

Bracing themselves for the strike they knew was coming, Ghost leaned back and waited for Ogrim's claws to come down on top of them, but after a few moments, they tilted their head

slightly as the expected attack never came. Instead, when they looked up, the other knight was watching them with a conflicted look in his eyes.

“You... small creature. You are different from the other I have seen. My King told me that there was only one, but-” he shifted slightly to look behind Ghost at Found, “-I can see clearly that it was not the case. Where did you come from? Why did you-”

“Ogrim! What are you *doing!?”* Isma’s cry startled the small group, and Ghost latched onto their sibling’s arm before dashing around the Great Knight in front of them and fleeing as quickly as possible. Reassuring themselves that Hornet could take care of herself, they sped away from the chamber with Found trailing behind them, the sound of Ogrim’s footsteps urging them forward.

“Wait- wait!” they heard him call after them but Ghost was too panicked, too paranoid without their weapon, to stop and see if he would show them mercy again. They needed to flee- to get someplace *safe*-

Glancing about, they realized the only way out of the room was through a thin channel of acidic water. Forcing down their anxiety, Ghost carefully lifted Found back into their arms and waited for their sibling to cling securely to their cloak before they waded into the hissing fluid, the tiny green fruit they held keeping their shell safe from harm as they sloshed through the tunnel towards the other side. Part of Ghost was now extremely glad that they’d gained some height from their time in the black egg.

Once they were out, the normally quiet pipes felt louder than ever as the two siblings fell into the reservoir below, stale lakewater from the city above cushioning their short drop. Thanks to their light constitution, neither of the vessels sank very deep before they bobbed to the surface again. Gasping silently, Ghost pulled their arms forward and kicked towards the closest edge so they could lift themselves out of the water, all the while remembering how much they despised being damp and cold.

Behind them, Found crawled out as well, shaking lightly even as they moved to lean against Ghost’s side.

‘We have to keep moving so we can try to get someplace where Hornet can find us later,’ Ghost’s thoughts were uneven in their own mind, but they couldn’t afford to stop and gather themselves when Ogrim was likely still in pursuit of the two.

‘Where? Where will we go? The leafy one will catch us no matter where we try to flee.’ Found’s worries only weighed down on Ghost more as they hurried down the pipeline, clutching their sibling’s hand like a vice.

Somewhere behind them, they could hear Ogrim’s boisterous laughter echoing through the waterways. It was only when they came to a dead end that reality seemed to sink in.

‘I’m sorry, I couldn’t save you,’ Ghost projected, hopelessness draining the remaining strength from their limbs as they turned to face what they knew was right around the corner.

As the Great Knight approached, their body was seized by an unnatural fear. It was unlike them to be afraid, much less of a foe they'd defeated once already, but they were still defenseless and unable to fight back. So, when Ogrim drew closer, Ghost prepared themselves for the worst.

Though, it seemed that for a second time, the worst would not come.

Upon reaching them, the taller knight observed the two siblings for a few moments, his claws lowered and out of the way as he slowed his steps and knelt before them. "Please, calm yourselves. I promise I will not hurt you, either of you," he said, his voice as soft as it could go with its usually booming timbre. "I only want answers, ones that my King and Isma seem hesitant to grant me."

Still clinging to their sibling's shoulders, Found's thoughts drifted into Ghost's mind with a surprised, *'Well, this is an unexpected turn of events.'*

Nodding silently, they couldn't help but agree.

Chapter End Notes

leave me comments i promise ill write more

Chapter 25: Hornet 06

Chapter Summary

yell heah fight fight fight

Chapter Notes

More! Chapters! Now!

In between the flailing vines she was dodging, Hornet's thread whipped around faster than the eye could see. A lesser opponent would have been sliced to ribbons by her attacks, but Isma was a seasoned warrior, tried and trained with years of deadly combat. However, Hornet's skills were honed by an age spent defending herself against the wild beasts and infected denizens of Hallownest's ruins far into the future. She'd fought deadlier battles and survived, and now she had even more of a reason to stay strong.

Her siblings were able to flee thanks to her distraction, and without keeping Isma back, there was little chance that they'd make it out of the kingdom's waterways alive.

Standing her ground in front of the room's exist, Hornet panted with exertion. There was a hairline crack extending from her eye to the tip of her left horn, and her right leg was close to buckling under her weight. Isma was a formidable opponent, and she'd be even more frustrated with her current state had she not given as good as she'd got.

The Great Knight's chest was heaving as she leaned on her nail, various rips and tears visible in the leafy mass covering her body, while the vines supporting her limbs were nearly completely severed. At some point, she'd become partially blinded by her own blood dripping into her eyes, but while Isma hadn't escaped their battle unscathed, Hornet still knew that Ogrim had left the room in pursuit of her siblings. She couldn't spend any more time keeping the knight in front of her busy, all pretenses of respect and admiration for her former idol discarded the moment she realized that there was no room for nostalgia in such a place. Isma would have killed Ghost and Found, and it was Hornet's duty now to defend them when they themselves could not. Her needle may be gone, but Hornet was deadly even when armed with only her thread.

"I seem to have underestimated you, stranger. It isn't often that I am able to be bested by one not of my King's own. Whoever taught you should be proud." Isma's words were anything but insincere, and Hornet drew herself up slightly at the praise.

“I learned from the best,” she said, thinking of her mentors, her mother, and the cruel reality she’d faced in the wake of the kingdom's fall, “and you would do well to think twice about crossing me or my siblings again.”

As the two continued to size each other up, neither willing to show even a hint of weakness after their battle, Hornet noticed a particular noise echoing down the corridor. As it drew nearer, she recognized the sound of armored plates clanging against each other.

“What-” She began, before jolting slightly when Ogrim quite literally fell into the room with a laugh, both her siblings held in his arms. Upon seeing them, she let out a shout and tried to reach out for them, but dropped to one knee as her leg collapsed beneath her as she bit back a cry of pain. “You- unhand them this instant, or I won’t hesitate to- !”

“Be still! You two- there is no reason for us to fight each other,” the knight interrupted, letting both Ghost and Found out of his grip before moving to his companion’s side. “We were wrong, Isma. Please, stand down.” It was barely a second before she did, her thread fluttering to the ground as the strength in her grip faded almost instantly. As her siblings lifted her arms to drape across their shoulders, Hornet watched Ogrim pick up the incapacitated Isma and nestle her damaged body carefully in his arms before beckoning the rest of the room’s occupants to follow him with a slight head movement.

“Ghost, what did you do?” she said, wincing as her wounds protested against her movements as she leaned on her siblings while they walked.

‘I shared the truth of our nature with Ogrim,’ they replied, sending her images of themselves trapped by the other knight, before they reached out and held one of his claws in both their hands. *‘He knows we aren’t the empty, unthinking creatures he was led to believe we were. We were lucky.’*

Watching them closely, Hornet tried not to let the fear rise up at the thought of escaping Isma only to find the other knight standing over the decimated shells of her siblings. It was only after she forced herself to remember that they were both with her that she could relax into their hold, sighing with relief.

“That- that is good to hear. You and Found are unharmed?” At her inquiry, both vessels nodded and the slightest bit more tension left her. It seemed that her family was safe for the mean time. Lifting her head to glance at the armored beetle in front of them, Hornet found herself wondering why the fifth of the king’s Great Knights was all but unknown in the future. “Where is he leading us?” she asked.

Instead of responding to her, Ghost looked up at Ogrim, who turned his head as soon as he noticed them watching him.

“It appears that our-” he paused, his eyes turning pensive for a moment, “-that our king...deceived us, when he told us of the origins behind your kind. You’re not the mindless tools he described you to be, and yet...” Hornet felt a distinct discomfort settle itself in her chest as his tone turned low and defeated. “Knowing what I do now, I have no doubts that my fellow Knights and I are at least somewhat responsible for many a grave injustice to your kin. We were lead to believe you were simply empty creatures that were crafted for a specific

purpose, not- not *children* .” His voice strained, and Hornet watched him clutch Isma tighter before looking back at her.

“You two are certainly warriors of a similar caliber. In any other circumstance I would resent you for this, but I know you were only protecting your own. You’re both wounded, and there’s only one place we can go to that will treat you,” Ogrim said, climbing out of the chamber as the rest followed. “As part of my repayment for what you’ve had to endure, I will make sure you all get there safely.”

Chapter 26: Interlude 2

Chapter Summary

Everyone takes a well deserved break and the author restrains herself from memeing for a whole 1.7k words

Chapter Notes

god this was fun to write

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Thank you again for helping us, I know it's an inconvenience to you to have to turn away any other customers who might need to use the spring."

"Oh, no no no! It's my honor to assist and serve the Great Knights who work to keep this kingdom safe from harm, and your associates are welcome anytime as well. The Pleasure House might primarily be a place of entertainment, but our doors- all of them -are always open to you. My daughter just recently finished pupating, and I'll be training her to take my place soon. I want her to know who it is we have to be thankful for so that we can continue to welcome guests here in peace."

Looking up from where they lay, half submerged in warm, bubbling spring water with Found asleep against their shoulder, Ghost watched Ogrim and the owner of the Pleasure House exchange words. The elderly butterfly who owned the establishment obviously hadn't flown in years, her wings already gray from the edges to their centers, though they still remained lustrous and glittery. They'd heard her singing even before their group had reached the hot springs, and to Ghost, it was a wonder that time hadn't stolen her voice as well as her youth.

Across from them, Hornet was half-asleep, the soul infused stream having already healed her to the point where they could no longer see the places where Isma had split her mask during their fight. As for the plant knight herself, she'd left sometime ago with a hushed promise to Ogrim that she'd return shortly as soon as she was well enough to stand and walk on her own. Her fellow knight had protested, but ultimately, he'd been forced to let her leave to her own devices.

"I see you three are looking better." Glancing up, Ghost met Ogrim's gaze as he kneeled beside the spring. "Your sister seems rather exhausted, but I wouldn't blame her. Fighting with Isma is a challenge that would drain even the rest of us knights!" They leaned back as he began to laugh, but they were truly grateful for his help. Without the Great Knight's cover,

they would've never been able to get up and out of the waterways and through the City of Tears without being found by the city guards.

Yet, it seemed that the large beetle still had some secrets left as the group took the hidden servant's paths all the way up to the Pleasure House, where they were welcomed by their aging butterfly hostess and her young daughter- the future Songstress Marissa, Ghost realized. Raising herself out of the water from where she'd been slipping lower, Hornet took a sharp breath that caused Ghost and Ogrim to look towards her.

"She is a formidable foe, but it isn't just my bout with her that has left me weak. We haven't spared a true moment for rest since we were in Deepnest, and that one was fitful and brief," she said, letting herself recline slightly against the edge of the pool. Turning back towards Found, Ghost ignored how their horns pressed against their face. They realized that their sibling might be feeling a similar way, having only switched between stressed unconsciousness and restless wakefulness ever since Ghost brought them out of the Basin. Even they themselves were starting to feel worn out, and they were the hardiest of the three.

"Well, Isma will be returning shortly. I know I shouldn't have let her go in such a state, but I can't do much to stop her once she's truly made up her mind, and it's for the best that she work out her thoughts before coming back. She is a gentle and compassionate soul at her core, and I know that the weight of the mistake we have aided in has undoubtedly left her mind as troubled as my own." Ogrim pointedly ignored Hornet's derisive huff.

'You two should settle your differences when she comes back. We'd do best to have Isma as our ally and not as our enemy,' Ghost projected, their thoughts drifting slightly as they sank a little lower into the spring.

Hornet's responding sigh was tinged with annoyance. "Just because you are correct does not mean I have to be happy about it. I'm not apologizing to her for calling her the king's pet."

Ghost sent her an amused wave of agreement, while the Great Knight across from them reared back in surprised as he turned to Hornet, somewhat startled. "You what? Are you speaking of Isma? Such disrespect from the youth, despite your skills in battle. She was simply doing her job!"

"And I was doing mine by ensuring the safety of my siblings. Or shall you blame me for that as well?" Hornet snapped, raising a hand to rub absentmindedly at the place where one of Isma's attacks had caused her mask to fracture. "There is a difference in defending one's family and defending one's pride." Despite the hard edge to her voice, Ogrim nodded at her.

"You speak the truth, although you needn't be so sharp with your words. We may have been mislead by our king, but we acted out of duty. I do not begrudge you your anger, but do not hold our misguided actions against us," he said, kneeling beside the pool. Before Hornet could retort once more, her attention was pulled towards the door as a young butterfly entered the room carrying a tray laden with savory looking morsels arranged on it. Upon seeing the occupants of the spring, she fluttered towards them and set the tray down near the edge of the water within arms reach.

“Here’s refreshments for you, distinguished guests, as a courtesy of the Pleasure House,” she said, her voice carrying over the sound of running water in a soothing lilt. When Ghost looked up at her face, they saw Marissa staring down at them. “You must all be quite hungry, after all, you came to us in quite a state.”

Glancing at the food spread out before them, Ghost hesitated. Across from them, Hornet reached over and picked up what appeared to be a piece of boofly meat that was dripping with a kind of honey-based sauce. They saw her appraise the morsel for a brief second before it vanished beneath her mask with barely a sound. If they focused hard, they could sense their sister’s satisfaction as she snatched up another bite. At the sight of Hornet’s enthusiastic reaction, Marissa lifted a hand to cover up her quiet laughter before she looked back at Ghost.

“Would you not like to try as well? Or maybe these aren’t to your taste?” she asked, watching them shoot glances at the platter. “I can bring up something else.”

Ghost tried to reach towards the spread, but was interrupted when Found raised their head and turned to look at the new occupant in the room before immediately being distracted by the presence of food. Ghost watched as Ogrim, Marissa, and Hornet all reared back in surprise as they picked up a morsel in each hand before-

“Where...where did it go?” Hornet’s startled inquiry matched the thoughts of the other non-vessels in the room as Found leaned back against Ghost’s shoulder, a pleased aura coming off of them as they settled back into their sibling’s side.

“I did not know that your kind was capable of consumption in such a way,” Ogrim said, his voice oddly lacking its usual bravado. Ghost gave a mental roll of their eyes as they selected their own piece and drew it into the void making up their shell. Instead of storing it in themselves like they did with the rest of their belongings, they felt their body absorb the energy from the food, a brief moment of relief flooding through them as their fatigue faded away just a bit more.

“Well, to each their own!” Marissa seemed both confused and amused, but as she turned to leave, she glanced back at them with a smile in her eyes. “I’ll bring up dessert in a few, though please don’t hesitate to ring me if you need anything else!” Ghost and Ogrim waved to her as she departed, but Hornet was occupied with polishing off the food that the rest of them hadn’t touched.

Isma returned to the group sometime later with a nail and needle slung across her back. Both Ghost and Hornet watched her approach hesitantly, but upon seeing their weapons, the two siblings tentatively let the other knight approach. It was obvious that her wounds hadn’t completely healed, the sections of her body where Hornet had sliced her apart were still soft and pale in appearance, and Ghost knew that it wouldn’t take much for them to tear open again.

Even so, she set down the sibling’s weapons at the edge of the pool before crossing over to where Ogrim was waiting for her. As she sat down beside him, Ghost watched the vine-like

parts of her limbs settle in the spring before she let out a barely audible sigh, leaning against her fellow knight's shoulder as he carefully rested his claw against her opposite hip.

Hornet had already snatched up her needle practically the moment it left Isma's hand, and while Ghost was content with knowing where their nail was, they couldn't help but giggle inwardly as their sister hoisted herself out of the hot spring, ignoring how her sharp movements made the water slosh over the rim of the pool as she tracked droplets everywhere to reach the bench where their cloaks were. As she set to polishing and re-tying the thread to her weapon, Isma turned to watch as well.

"I see that your sister wastes no time in reclaiming what is hers," she said, with equal parts respect and amusement. "It's nice, isn't it? To have someone so dedicated to watching over you." Ghost nodded once before they were distracted by the sight of Found climbing out of the pool as well, their unsteady legs carrying them over to where Hornet was.

It was almost surreal, watching their siblings in such a way. There was a carefree atmosphere to the room that they knew would vanish the moment the stepped outside of the Pleasure House, but instead of thinking too hard about it, Ghost decided to enjoy themselves for however brief the opportunity was. Even the Radiance was contentedly silent in the depths of their being.

For once, Hallownest could wait.

Chapter End Notes

if you leave me comments ill love you and write/post Faster

Chapter 27: Ghost 14

Chapter Summary

its nice to get in touch with your voidside sometimes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Looking back at their sister, Ghost couldn't help but notice just how much more invigorated Hornet seemed. Her stance was steady and her cloak fluttered even as the rain fell upon their masks endlessly. The two of them hopped across buildings and over the guards patrolling the City of Tears, never stopping too long for fear of drawing the attention of the capitol's protective force.

It wasn't far from the Pleasure House to their next destination, but they weren't dealing with husks in this time. Alerting one guard meant potentially causing swarms of them to be summoned in pursuit of the siblings, and in a truly dire case, possibly even the king himself might learn of their whereabouts.

Such a risk wasn't something that either Ghost nor Hornet would be able to take lightly.

Thankfully, the chance of them being discovered was reduced now that it was just the both of them striving to mend the past, with Found having been rather unceremoniously taken in by the two Great Knights- a surprise that had stunned Ghost to say the least -under oath.

Isma and Ogrim promised to watch over Hornet and Ghost's sibling, saying that they couldn't go against the king themselves, but they could at least do something to help make up for the wrongdoings they'd been complicit in. Found seemed rather unbothered by such an arrangement, but it took some convincing to get Ghost to even consider leaving them behind without holding the other two knights at nailpoint.

Hornet was slightly more understanding and gave her blessing along with a vague threat that may or may not have involved slicing Isma's vines into ribbons.

Yet either way, Found was safe and out of reach of the Pale King, and that meant that Hornet and Ghost could focus on their next objective.

"The Watcher's Spire is just ahead, Ghost. Though I don't know how we're supposed to reach the top without attracting the attention of any sentries, not to mention Lurien's guardian knights are very much still alive and in control of themselves," Hornet mumbled, perched on a hidden alcove in between two towers. Slightly behind her, Ghost peeked out and focused their gaze on the guard stationed just in front of the entrance to the building that they needed

to enter. When all the bugs inhabiting the city were husks it would've been easy to just cut their way through whatever stood before them to reach their goal, but now was not the case.

'I don't know how we can get past them without them noticing us, unless...' Ghost looked down at themselves pensively. They hadn't much time to practice with their manipulation over void, despite being the Lord of Shades, but if the idea worked- *'Hornet, hold on to me and don't let go until I say so.'*

Their sister gave them an odd look but held onto their offered hand regardless.

Approaching the entrance to the spire from the side, Ghost waited until they were nearly there before reaching for the void within and coating themselves with it. Where their hand was joined with Hornet's, the darkness around them moved to cover her completely after a moment, her gasp of surprise prompting them to look back and see her blinking at them, her eyes glowing white, blown wide with surprise.

It seemed that she'd never been this in touch with the abyssal part of her heritage before. When she next spoke, Ghost found that her voice had taken on a distinctly whisper-like quality, her words sounding more like the language of higher beings than the common tongue of bugs.

"Ghost, won't they still be able to see us like this?" she asked. In response, they simply blinked at her and shrugged as if to say *'Well, there's only one way to find out.'*

Hesitantly, the two siblings drew even closer to the guard posted in front of the spire. Ghost figured that at the very least, if they were attacked, their coating of void would leave them invulnerable just long enough for them both to escape. However, as they moved to slip past the sentry, their eyes never drifted towards them once. There was a strange kind of satisfaction that came with slipping past the armed bug as they rushed into the building, not wanting to test their luck more than they already had.

From there, getting to the top of the spire was almost too easy for them. Despite their fears of any of the sentries- or, worse, Lurien's personal guard -spotting them, not a single bug paid them any attention as the two living shadows kept to the darkest parts of the rooms during their ascent. It was only once they'd reached the last elevator that would carry them all the way up to Lurien's quarters that Ghost released the veil of darkness covering both themselves and their sister.

As the blackness melted off Hornet's frame, they caught her staring at herself, her arms held out in front of her as though she was seeing them for the very first time.

"So, that is what it's like to be truly one with the void," she said softly, before looking at them with something akin to wonder in her gaze. "Have you always been capable of such things?"

Ghost regarded her for a moment, the rattling of the lift's chains pulling them upwards being the only background noise to their thoughts. *'Perhaps? My ability to manipulate the void never let me accomplish acts like this one before, though maybe it's because of our sibling's*

influence,' they responded, already missing the other vessels they'd had to leave behind for the sake of continuing their journey.

If they reached inside themselves, they could sense Nosk's presence along with the faint tethers that connected them to the rest of their siblings, distant as they were. And even deeper still was the Radiance, with the quiet hum of her power providing an almost comforting warmth. *'Or it is possible that it is because the Old Light and I have reached an accord. Her own strength aids mine, and the reverse is true in turn.'*

Hornet nodded and tilted her head upwards as the elevator continued its ascent. "Truly our father was foolish in not seeing the potential even a so-called failure could harbor within itself. You've far exceeded what anyone thought you capable of, and even now you only continue to grow stronger." Before Ghost could reply, she placed her hand on their shoulder, eyes still focused above their heads. "I am proud of you, for all that you have achieved."

Ignoring the inky black tears that began to collect in the holes in their mask, Ghost leaned against her side. The lift would soon reach its destination, but for now, they would savor this moment.

Chapter End Notes

please comment so i might be able to keep a semi-consistent update schedule!

Chapter 28: Hornet 07

Chapter Summary

Hornet and Ghost finally meet the Watcher.

Chapter Notes

hi guys i got tired of getting kicked around by nkg so im posting fic chapters to feel less bad about myself kgjfhdbdfls

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as the lift arrived at its destination, Hornet and Ghost could plainly see two things. One was Lurien himself, perched upon a cushioned seat in front of his telescope, and the other was his personal servant, a skittish bug who screeched out a “You-who are you!? You’re not supposed to be here!” right before they were wrapped up in Hornet’s threads and moved to the far side of the room. Once they were out of the way, the two siblings cornered the Watcher, his one-eyed gaze focused solely on Ghost, who glanced back at Hornet when they remembered that the bug in front of them wouldn’t be able to understand them without making contact.

“Lurien,” she started, watching him carefully as he lifted himself off his seat to stand before them, “I don’t suppose you know who we are, or why we’ve come here-”

Hornet drew back when his hand came up to prompt her to pause. His mask made his expression completely unreadable, but they could tell he wasn’t confused by their appearance at all.

“You assume wrongly,” he said, before stepping past them and crossing the room, beckoning the two siblings with one hand. “Please remove the restraints from my assistant, they have done nothing to deserve such treatment. You and yours will not be harmed within my city, I will make sure of it.”

At that, the siblings shared a look before Hornet stepped forth to deftly unwind the smaller bug before moving back to give them their space. To their credit, Lurien’s assistant only took a moment to steady themselves before they were back to putting on a dutiful air.

“Should- should I inform your knights, sir?” they asked, with barely a stutter and only glancing at Hornet and Ghost twice. Lurien waved them off with hardly a look, sending them

skittering away and hurrying down the lift. Once the three were alone, the Watcher fixed his gaze upon them once more.

“Come... my personal quarters are better equipped to entertain guests,” he murmured, prompting Hornet to give him another look. Nevertheless, she and Ghost both followed him to the back of the room. Stepping behind the stone table- that would hopefully never be replaced with a plinth for this other bug’s body, Hornet thought -Lurien pushed aside a heavy curtain and allowed them both to enter before moving to sit atop a cushion in the midst of the room, which appeared to be an incredibly plush bedroom with few decorations besides several pillows and a desk. “There, isn’t this nicer? Much more...intimate.”

Ghost seemed to shudder inwardly at his words, and Hornet could feel their confusion at the edge of her mind but pulled them over to sit next to her anyway, if only to put some distance between them and the Watcher.

“So, if you why we came to see you,” she said, leaving the statement in the air for a moment as he stared straight ahead at her, “then you know how important it is that you listen to what we have to say.” Lurien nodded.

“You are correct. Your arrival was foretold in dream, and I have seen the devastation my inaction will cause, but you must understand, I am devoted to my King. He who has given me all that I have, all that I am. I would be nothing without him,” he said, not noticing how Hornet’s grip on the pillow she sat upon grew tight. “and yet-” He looked up, going silent as he cast his gaze aside, the sound of rain hitting the outside of the building replacing his voice.

“The King... he listens not to my pleas. I have done everything in his name, devoted my life to him, yet he ignores my requests, he cares not for this magnificent city that I have built in his image, nor my wishes for his help in keeping it safe,” Lurien continued, a surprising amount of emotion in his voice. “Assist me. Do what I cannot and aid me in keeping Hallownest’s capital safe, and I will do whatever I can for you in turn.”

Hornet could see him trembling slightly, and for the first time, she felt an understanding with the most mysterious dreamer. In their time, Lurien had died believing in a king who never gave him the same level of respect. In a way, she could relate to his struggle.

In a bold move, Hornet shifted forward and placed her hands over Lurien’s shaking ones, catching his gaze and hearing his breath shutter as he made an attempt to still his movements. “What would you have us do?” she asked. In response, he gently pushed her hands away before standing and stepping out of the room, but not without calling for them to follow. Lurien led them to his telescope and encouraged Hornet to peer into the lens. Leaning down, she looked through the glass and saw-

“Another building? What about it?” Giving him a questioning glance, he motioned for Ghost to have a look as well. Once they’d seen the same as she had, Lurien pointed to the table across the room.

“On that table is a list, a very, very long list of missing citizens,” he said, his words tense. “All of which were last seen close to that complex. It is connected to another building where many of the city records are kept, so I have a high number of guards already stationed in that

area, and yet, bugs still vanish without a trace. Every time a search of the place is made, they find nothing. I receive more reports every day but I can't-" Lurien's voice caught as he moved towards the table, his hands skimming the names inscribed upon the document lying on its surface.

"I am losing more of my citizens to *this* than I am to the illness that my King insists is so deadly. Please, find out who or what is stealing away my people, and put a stop to it if you are able." Not noticing how Ghost's mind pushed against hers with urgency, Hornet took Lurien's hands in her own once again, clutching them firmly.

"We will do our best," she said, before letting go after she heard him make a soft noise of agreement. As she moved to turn away, the sound of the elevator arriving reached her, prompting Lurien to abandon his somber air.

"Ah, right on time," he hummed, as though he hadn't just been speaking of his worries over his missing citizens. "Did you bring the- oh, yes these will do quite nicely! Please come over here, you two." Crossing the room once more, Ghost and Hornet watched as Lurien took a set of cloaks from his assistant's arms before handing one to each of them. "Official city garments for you both. I can't have you looking unnecessarily suspicious when you're investigating for me, now can I? You can leave your regular clothes with me. I'll make sure they're well kept until you return."

While Ghost wasted no time in divesting themselves of the outfit Hornet made them, tucking their original one beneath the folds of the burgundy cloak they were given, Hornet herself shook her head at their shamelessness and turned back to Lurien.

"May I borrow your room for a moment?" she asked, apparently startling him slightly as he looked back at her sharply.

"I- oh, yes, of course you may." There was a tremor in his voice, but she didn't mention it to him, attributing his reaction to Ghost's behavior.

Stepping back into the room, Hornet appraised the wine colored fabric in her hands. She was by all rights a citizen of Hallownest thanks to her relation to the king, and yet she'd never stepped foot into the capitol as a member of its caste before. Letting out a sigh, Hornet undid her cloak and pulled it off her shoulders before donning the new one.

Upon leaving Lurien's personal study, she saw Ghost already waiting for her by the elevator while Lurien himself had reassumed his position in front of the telescope, his assistant dutifully updating the list of missing bugs behind her.

Once they caught her gaze, Ghost's thoughts pressed against hers, the question *'Ready to go?'* humming in her mind as she nodded and approached them. When they were both in the lift, Lurien shifted to give her one last parting look as Hornet raised her hand to the switch that would send them back down.

"We'll return as soon as we've found your lost citygoers, Keeper of the Spire." His official title felt right to say for some reason, and despite the lack of emotion that could be conveyed

with a mask as simple as the one he wore, Hornet could've sworn that Lurien was smiling at her even as the metal carriage descended out of sight once more.

'He likes you,' said Ghost, their amusement overlapping with her anticipation.

Hornet decided not to respond.

Chapter End Notes

props to you if you can tell what ship path im going down after this

Chapter 29: Ghost 15

Chapter Summary

> We're on our way to a den of Sinners

Chapter Notes

> almost 100 attempts on nkg and i still havent won, which is good for ya'll because i write more every time i die

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stepping out of the elevator, Ghost marveled at how little attention they were given by the bugs around them. In a way, they felt even more invisible now than they did when they'd coated themselves in shadow earlier.

Their cloaks were nothing too special. They were a standard color to match the shells of the City of Tear's common caste, and the only ornamentation on them was the simple clasp-stylized in the form of Lurien's own mask -keeping the fabric from sliding off their shoulders. It was entertaining to see the rich bugs meandering through the spire huff and turn away from them even as they made their way to the exit, Hornet trailing behind Ghost in an almost leisurely manner.

"I do not know how to feel about this," she whispered, "It is our birthright to be here as royalty of Hallownest, yet we must walk among our people as though we are lesser than them." Ghost slowed their gait to match their sister's as they looked up at her. "Was my mother was right to speak ill of this place? Perhaps I shall soon find out."

Nodding slowly, they left her to her thoughts, her tumultuous mind already distancing itself from their own as they walked. It would take some time to reach their destination, and Ghost was in no desire to rush.

They already knew what was waiting for them.

'The city is much different now than it was when it was in ruins,' Ghost projected to Hornet, who gave them an appraising look as she moved back to their side. Staring out of the glass panels making up the sides of the walkway, the two siblings gazed down at the bugs below them.

“Yes, well, it hasn’t been decimated by infection and a terrified populace yet, and hopefully never will be,” Hornet replied, briefly resting her hand on Ghost’s shoulder before moving ahead. “Come along, we aren’t here to reminisce of things that were and haven’t yet to be. We have a task to complete.” Letting out a brief pulse of amusement, Ghost hurried after her.

The end of the walkway was a direct connection to the building that Lurien kept a close eye on, and upon entering it, the siblings noticed two things.

One was that there was a distinct lack of any civilian presence anywhere that they could see, and the second was that there was a guard at almost every doorway, every lift, and nigh every corner of each room. Before they could approach the elevator that would take them where they needed to go, one of the sentries caught sight of them and began to relay what must have been an official decree in a very tense voice.

“Halt! All passers-by must first gain permission to enter by-” Before he could finish, another winged guard swooped down from above to give him a heavy clap on the shoulder.

“Hold on, hold on! Are your eyes going bad already? Can’t you see they’re wearing the Watcher’s crest?” they exclaimed, before leaning down to give both Ghost and Hornet a once-over. “Official business, I see! Don’t worry about us, we won’t get in your way. We’re only here to keep the general public out, already too many gone missing around this part of the city. I hope you’ll forgive my trainee as well, he’s a bit new to this.”

Letting out a short puff of air, Hornet nodded curtly at them both. “It’s fine, we expected some form of defenses to be here. Your diligence is appreciated, I’m sure.” At that, the two guards beamed slightly before stepping aside.

“Many thanks to you! Good luck with whatever is that He has you doing for him, and be careful, you two. There’s many a guard about, but our eyes do not reach everywhere.” There was a somewhat somber edge to their voice that stuck with the siblings even as they headed upward.

While the chains of the lift clicked away, Ghost felt a weariness in their limbs that they hadn’t experienced in some time.

‘Do you think Lurien already knows?’ the rhetorical question wasn’t meant to spill out of their thoughts, but it must have, because Hornet’s shoulders dropped slightly.

“I’m sure he does. He’s watched over this place long enough to understand how it works. He’s already come to terms with the fact that those who are missing won’t be returning to him. At least, not alive,” she mumbled. “But we’re going into this to make sure he doesn’t lose any more of his people. Lurien cares about the bugs who live under his care, that’s more than can be said about our father.” Ghost winced at the particularly harsh clang that echoed out when the elevator reached its destination.

Hornet’s weapon was already drawn as she headed towards the entrance of the complex next to them, and not long after, Ghost followed, their nail held at the ready.

“A Nest Of Danger...” They startled, missing a step as the familiar, powerful voice thrummed inside their mind. Ghost’s chest burned as the Old Light’s presence rose up from within. *“Beware, Little Shadow. You Enter A Place Of Scavengers. Hoarders Of Power Not Belonging To Themselves. They Will Pay For Their Defiance Of Her Laws.”*

‘I thought you encouraged the bugs of the Soul Sanctum to partake in their experiments in defiance of the king,’ Ghost thought back, not expecting the Radiance to rear up with indignity at such an idea. Her irritation sending waves of heat throughout their body.

“To Go Against Nature! To Defy One’s Self! It Is Blasphemy In Her Image. Weak Beings Will See What They Wish Under Her Influence Unconstrained,” she retorted, before settling slightly, a vague feeling of what might’ve been concern for their wellbeing briefly washing over them. *“You Will Be Cautious, And You Will Not Succumb To This Place. Retrieve Her Missing Pieces, Then Depart From Such Cursed Ground.”*

They didn’t know how to reassure her that they would be fine even though they’d already been through the Sanctum once before, so Ghost simply put up a confident air as they hurried to catch up with Hornet.

She may have her promise to the Watcher, but Ghost had their own oath to keep.

Chapter End Notes

depending on how long it takes me to beat this boss this fic might get updated a couple more times this week

Chapter 30: Hornet 08

Chapter Summary

this place smells like charred marshmallows

Chapter Notes

i beat nkg

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The inside of the building Lurien had specified was unusually bright, even for a place well stocked with lanterns. Hornet's sight took a moment to adjust, even as the very air seemed to glow with an ethereal quality. There were a few scattered tomes lying about the floor, their surfaces covered in writing she couldn't understand. After Ghost caught up to her, their familiar presence at her side, a round bug descended the steps leading to the room above, their eyes immediately locking onto the two siblings with an odd sort of glee.

"Oh, oh! A Visitor!" they exclaimed, before stepping closer to give them both a better look. "Or, perhaps, new patients seeking asylum here within our walls? Where do you hail from, strangers, and how may our luminous sanctuary be of service to you?" Hornet felt a distinct sense of unease making its way through her shell as the other bug gazed at her with their slightly bulbous eyes, an odd quality making them appear glossier than anything she'd seen before.

"Ah, yes, well," her eyes snapped to Ghost, who shook their head almost imperceptibly before she turned her attention back to the odd bug in front of her, "we're simple wanderers, seeking to cross the breadth of the kingdom. During our travels we heard of the spread of an illness, one that seems to affect the mind. You mentioned patients? Do you treat individuals suffering from such an ailment here?" Forcing her voice to waver with curiosity and trepidation, Hornet leaned in closer. "Could you perhaps, know of a cure?"

At this, the other bug reared back with surprise, while rubbing their claws together excitedly. Their eyes bulged slightly, the light in them growing brighter as they began to chitter with glee.

"You- you are no ordinary visitor! I shall take you to our Mas- Overseer! Yes," they said, before their gaze snapped over to Ghost. Hornet felt her sibling shudder inwardly as they were stared down. "Except for you, little thing. You stay here."

The sanctum bug watched pointedly as Ghost stepped backwards and shifted to sit on the floor.

'Go on without me. But be careful,' they projected to her. Tilting her head forward slightly, Hornet stopped herself from reaching out to them.

"I will come back for you," she said, before turning back to the other bug in the room, who gave her a stilted smile.

"Shall we?"

Hornet's eyes began to hurt as soon as she entered the upper section of the building. The sanctum worker led her higher and higher through the bright halls, passing by many other similar looking bugs as they busied themselves with apparent research. Swirling white energy floated about in glass containers littering the hallways, while her escort's high pitched, distorted voice rattled off praise for the facility.

"As you can see, we're doing the best work possible! We have truly harnessed the unfathomable power hidden within. We are no longer held back by the mind's limitations. Why, soon, we shall even reach the grand pinnacle, a feat that not even the king could think of achieving!" they crowed with delight, not noticing how Hornet only grew more uneasy and wary of them as they proceeded farther into the building.

Beyond the seemingly endless hallways occupied by busy scholars, Hornet began to understand Lurien's frustration. There wasn't a single hint of any illicit happenings that she'd seen yet.

However, before she could attempt her own subtle inquiry, her escort spun about and fixed her with an intense gaze. "Do tell me, esteemed guest, have you ever thought about whether or not it was possible to achieve that which has been sought after since the beginning of bugkind?" they asked, voice tense with what could only be described as anticipation and excitement.

Giving them what she hoped was an intrigued look, Hornet let them draw closer.

"What if I told you that here within our sanctum, we have discovered how to achieve *true immortality?"*

They spoke in hushed whispers of enthusiasm, and Hornet found herself standing completely still with shock. A newfound horror made its way through her shell, but she kept her visage calm as she straightened up.

"I would be most intrigued about how you and your fellows were able to achieve such a thing. For, as far as I know, all things die when it is their time," she responded, doing her best to keep the raw disgust out of her voice.

“Perhaps once, but now? We shall see an end to all that! No plague of mind, no decay of body shall be able to touch us once we have achieved perfection under the guidance of the Master,” they said, rubbing their claws together. “Come, come! You have an air about you that tells me that you’ll be able to appreciate what it is we have accomplished. Maybe you too will be one of those to receive the blessing that is immaculate perpetuity.”

Hornet was not given a chance to retort as they pulled her along, the halls becoming darker as they reached the inner part of the sanctum. The higher up they went, the more Hornet wished she hadn’t let them convince her to leave Ghost behind.

As soon as they entered a corridor at the top of the building, an immense pressure began to build in her head. Her guide was still talking to her, rambling on and on about how great their Master was and how they would soon achieve eternal life, as if a life with no ending was something to crave.

She seldom ever felt fear, but as they continued to proceed, Hornet couldn’t help the sudden feeling of utter panic that rose up within her chest. It was primal, instinctive, and every ounce of self-preservation she had was screaming out for her to *get away, get out, get out getoutgetoutgetout!*

“Ah, actually, I don’t think I’m feeling well enough to finish this tour of your facilities, and I don’t wish for my companion to worry-” she began, only for them to ignore her as they waved away her concerns.

“Nonsense! If you’re ill, there’s even more reason for you to see the Master! He who knows the truth of life and death. And as for your fellow traveler, you needn’t worry about them. We’ll have them well taken care of,” they said, in an odd sing-song tone.

If she’d been in a better state, Hornet might have immediately noticed what was wrong with their response, but by the time she’d finally realized what they were implying, they’d already dragged her down the corridor and through a set of doors leading to a wide open room. In the center, there was a single, massive bug hovering slightly above the ground, a feat not usually achievable without wings or threads.

As they approached, the weight in her head only increased to an unbearable level, her body trembling under the force of her shell trying to keep itself together even as the other occupants of the room turned their malicious sights onto her.

“The last subject you brought me was a failure. What’s this?” The booming voice of the floating bug rattled her to her core, and soon Hornet found herself on her knees, blearily staring up at the being above her.

“Something new! Something special!” Her escort’s voice was getting farther and farther away, and the only sound she could hear clearly was the sound of her body beginning to come apart from the inside. There was a horrible rending noise coming from somewhere, and when she cast her blurring gaze downward, she could see a bug- not one of the sanctum’s servants, but a kingdom bug dressed in the City of Tear’s classic red garbs.

Hornet couldn’t even hear herself gasp as they reached out to her, their last moments punctuated by a whimper of pain before the life left their eyes. Letting out a choked noise, she ignored how the other bugs in the room watched her reach for her needle.

Her hand hadn’t even reached the hilt before a burst of light collided with her face.

Chapter End Notes

gonna try and update this fic at least twice a week from here on out! im gearin up for nano and ive never felt better

Chapter 31: Ghost 16

Chapter Summary

Ghost performs a rescue mission.

Chapter Notes

This is one of the shortest chapters ive ever written for this fic smh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ghost knew not to trust the bugs of the Soul Sanctum. Even before now, the place had been a den of misdirection and surprise attacks that they were loathe to admit occasionally got the better of them. However, with the Radiance's warning, they had even more of a reason to be wary of the place, and as soon as Hornet left to follow the sanctum worker, Ghost had wrapped themselves in shadow and proceeded to follow them up into the next room before making a left.

The lift was still there, to their delight, and it only took a quick ride up for Ghost to find themselves standing in front of a- surprisingly unlocked -door.

Glancing through the keyhole, Ghost found themselves unable to see anyone on the other side, but that didn't erase their wariness. If anything, they only grew more cautious as they pushed open the door and clung to the edges of the room. As they crossed to the other side, they felt the slightest bit of tension leave their frame when they realized that none of the sanctum's warrior guardians was going to teleport in above them to try to run them through.

Hurrying upwards, they were relieved to find the room above equally empty, save for a solitary figure strung up on a table in the center of the room.

Something twisted in their chest as Ghost approached the Snail Shaman, his limp body held up only by the shackles keeping their his attached to the table. As they reached up for the restraints, intending to release the locks so that, at the very least, the other bug could be laid to rest without being chained to a slab, the snail's eyes flew open, bright white meeting pitch black.

"...dark savior? Have you truly come for this misguided creature? Pity on me, your wayward follower." he rasped out, his voice hoarse with disuse. Upon the discovery that he wasn't dead, Ghost hurried to undo the latches, letting the shaman lean on them for a moment before they moved to sit on the floor. "Ah...ahaha... I thought- I thought I would die here," he

continued, laughing slightly without an ounce of humor, “my child, I would’ve left them behind. I...” He stopped and slumped over slightly.

Trying not to let themselves fret too much, Ghost waited with trepidation for a few seconds before the snail straightened up again once more.

“Thank you, *thank you,”* he said, his eyes filled with tears. “If you hadn’t freed me from this place-” he drew in a shuddering breath, “well, it’s probably for the best that I don’t dwell it.”

Leaning back, Ghost tilted their head to the side in a gesture that they hoped was reassuring before lightly patting him on the shoulder, pointing to the way out.

The gate leading to the ledge above the entrance to the experimentation room clicked open as soon as they pushed on the lever, and the snail stood, his previous exhaustion replaced with an enthusiasm for freedom. “Oh, yes! Getting out of here would most likely be for the best. I have no idea how long its been since I last saw my family,” he said, wringing his hands together as Ghost led him out of the room.

The two of them kept up the stealthy act until they’d reached the entrance to the sanctum, the snail briefly clutching Ghost’s hands between his own as his eyes widened with fear.

“Wait- wait! I can’t go out there, I’m not welcome here! This place has rejected our kind for eons. I won’t suddenly be accepted just because- because...” his words were slowly replaced with silence, and Ghost watched his expression turn from fearful to perplexed. “There is another like you here, is there not? You must go! Go now-!”

Startled, they made a vague gesture with their hands, not understanding. In response, the snail pushed them ahead of himself, his tone quickly turning panicked. “Go, go! She’s in danger! The tyrant has her, and she won’t last long in his grasp!” Now that, they recognized.

However, when faced with running off to meet the danger headlong or making sure the snail shaman was safe, he made the decision for them.

“Worry not for my safety, stranger! I only need find my way out of this raining cavern and back to my den above. Yet, I cannot leave you without repayment for the kindness you have shown me on this day.” Before Ghost could object, he took their face in between his hands and stared into their eyes, the bright white sending a shockwave through their body as the void within them surged with energy. They barely had a chance to comprehend what had happened before the snail was hurrying off, his parting words growing distant. “May you find your form unconstrained, dark savior! Good luck be unto you!”

Shaking off the surprise, Ghost turned on their heel and ran towards the heart of the sanctum under a cloak of darkness. Hornet needed them.

Chapter End Notes

Regular updates returning soon-ish!

Chapter 32: Ghost 17

Chapter Summary

everyone's *favorite* boss fight

Chapter Notes

haha surprise here's one more

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Ghost navigated the shining hallways of the sanctum, their insides twisted and rolled as the atmosphere became almost painful to withstand. Their soul vessels were only barely being kept stable by the core they held, even as they forced themselves to vent off the extra energy, the bright motes floating away from their body while they ran.

Unsurprisingly, as they headed for the center of the building, several soul twisters and warriors teleported in to halt their progress. To their grim delight, Ghost found the task of dispatching them to be almost *too* easy- their spells practically overloaded with energy as they tore through every obstacle in their way.

While in any other situation, they would have tried to deliberately avoid the loss of life that formerly came with their presence among Hallownest's ruin, they knew the bugs within the complex were killers. Countless innocent citizens were lost to their desperate experiments, and for that, Ghost wouldn't hesitate when the time came.

When they finally reached the main chamber of the sanctum, they ignored all other passageways in favor of crashing through the glass floor below them with a particularly powerful spell, the force of it shattering the panes and causing the ground to tremble when they collided with it. The shockwaves carried all the way to the walls, and a pained cry drew their attention to the opposite side of the room, where a lone sanctum bug- the one who they'd met at the entrance, they realized -was scrambling to get away even as its lower half began to melt away. As they approached, it ceased its attempts to escape and began groveling instead.

"Oh, magnificent figure! How powerful, how awe inspiri- ghhk!" Its words were cut off abruptly the moment Ghost forced it onto its back, their nail weighing on its throat. For not the first time, their frustration at not being able to speak with other bugs was palpable, their free hand clenched as they realized there was no way for them to ask where the Soul Master was.

Beneath them, the sanctum acolyte began to gargle on their own flesh as their body continued to liquefy. Granting them their first and last gift of pity, Ghost stabbed downward in a fluid motion, ending their life as swiftly as possible.

The sense of dread within them was building, and with a newfound urgency, they hurried into the next room.

Gone were the follies and mistakes that once floated and crawled among the depths of the sanctum, instead, the place was almost deathly empty. The quiet of the massive chamber made Ghost's shell feel like it was full of mites.

Proceeding downward with caution, they picked their way over the piles of corpses that littered the room. The somber reminder of the cruelty of the Soul Master and his underlings made their limbs shake with righteous anger as they proceeded to descend even further into the pit.

There weren't as many bodies in this time as there were in the future, but even then, the piles stacked high with deceased bugs, many of them no doubt missed by whatever was left of their families. Ghost winced as they were forced to climb over the mounds to reach the platforms above. The farther they went into the eerie halls, the more worried they grew. Almost instinctively, they casted their mind outwards in search of their sister, seeking out her familiar presence.

They froze in place when they realized they couldn't feel her.

It was a desperate urgency that caused them to scramble for the higher being nestled at their very core.

'Help me... help me! Help me!!!' they screamed in their own mind, and this time when the rush of fire filled their chest, they embraced it. *'I can't feel her- I can't find her! Radiance!!'*

Ghost's internal wailing was accompanied by the deep thrum of energy that spilled from their being. Where once horror might have consumed them upon feeling that bright light take roost within, the Radiance's power spilling out, they now let themselves be used as a conduit. The Old Light didn't speak, but they could feel her essence mingling with their own, their mind reaching farther, *farther-*

A faint cry laced with darkness touched the edge of their mental sphere and Ghost shot off into the dark, their body burning from within.

'Hornet- Hornet!' they cried out, only to receive nothing but waves of pain in return. Their nail was already drawn, the light at the end of the hallway growing brighter.

Upon reaching the next room, Ghost took in the scene even as they were moving forward. Hornet was there- she was there! But there was something wrong, they could already tell from the quick glance they'd given her before they rushed at the other occupant of the room. The Soul Master floated nearby, channeling something- likely soul -from a massive statue in the center of the room.

Without giving him a chance to notice their arrival, they fired off a shade soul at him, the spell ripping through him and stopping his concentration. His eyes- burning orange and sickly -turned to them as they brandished their weapon, pointing it at him in an obvious threat.

“Hoh... little thing thinks it can challenge me! I who have achieved power beyond even the King, beyond all who crawl beneath me!” he chuckled and Ghost only felt themselves grow more enraged. As an accompaniment to their anger, the Radiance’s own fury at the Soul Master’s use of her power hummed along with them.

When he shot weaponized orbs of soul at them, Ghost dashed through them, hurrying to get close so they could hack away at his overgrown body. With each of their slashes, they tore into him with purpose.

Hornet’s mind was unreachable to them, this thought kept them going as they forced their way through all his attacks, ignoring the soul blasts he fired at them, and meeting his charges head on as the Radiance channeled her own strength into their body, her presence being the only reason their shell didn’t splinter due to the damage they were withstanding.

“Puny creature! I am untouchable by death, but you will soon meet it!” His words did nothing but fuel the fire burning within their chest, the Old Light taking hold of their thoughts as she shrieked in retaliation.

“FOUL BEAST THINKS IT CAN DEFY US,” she roared in their mind. *“DESTROY IT, LITTLE SHADOW.”* The Radiance hadn’t been this enraged since they’d woken up to her voice in the Black Egg, but for once, they agreed with her sentiment.

As the Soul Master floated above them, Ghost’s irritation reached a new high as they thought about how he continued to hover out of reach. They wanted to tear him apart- they wanted to make it so he could never steal another life again-!

With a sudden clarity, they reached for the limitless void within, its depths churning in response to their call. Bringing it to the surface, they felt their shell warp as a pair of writhing tendrils erupted from their back before whipping out towards the Soul Master and wrapping tightly around his limbs. His cry of surprise brought them a strange sense of satisfaction as the Radiance rose to the forefront of their mind once more.

Her power surged through them, the searing pulse that should have hurt them was instead focused on the bloated creature in front of them. They could sense the moment her mind took over the other bug, and when she pulled back on the fragment of power embedded within the Soul Master, they pulled on her essence in turn.

The screams of the tyrant before them were drowned out by the roar of two opposing energies working in tandem as Ghost felt the Radiance anchor herself to them as she finally succeeded in tearing the infection out and drawing it- was well as the other smaller pieces lingering within the City of Tears -back into herself. It only took them a moment to focus as she returned to their core, the flames settling almost instantly.

Without the extra power to fall back on, the Soul Master quickly deflated and lost altitude as the void tendrils keeping him in place wrung the last bits of soul from his body. Ghost felt no remorse as they reeled in the struggling husk from where he'd crashed to the ground. Vindication filled them as they raised their nail, ready to end his rule over the sanctum, before a sharp wave of pain reached their mind.

"Gh..os..t.." Straightening up immediately, they moved away from the Soul Master and ran to where Hornet was lying. To their horror they found her quite literally coming apart at the seams. Soul spilled from every crack in her shell, her eyes dripping white as she trembled on the ground.

'Hornet... Hornet!' They called out to her, only to receive nothing in response. Fueled by desperation, they reached into themselves and pulled out one of their soul vessels and held it towards her. They cursed the small capacity of the other containers they held as only a minuscule amount was absorbed. Panicking, they wrapped their hands around her wrists and focused.

Belatedly, they realized that it was a mistake to bring Hornet with them into the sanctum. Just as the lesser bugs who lost their form when exposed to raw soul, Hornet wasn't designed to withstand such a large amount of energy at once. Even with them drawing in as much power as they could from her, the damage continued to progress as she choked on the very air around them. They needed to get her out of the building and away from the soul-infused atmosphere.

Carefully lifting Hornet into their arms, they cradled her much larger body close to her chest as best they could while the void tendrils behind them lifted the Soul Master's emaciated body and pulled him along. Thankfully they'd cleared much of the way earlier, but Ghost still winced every time they made a particularly hard landing or needed to climb over an obstacle.

Reaching the outside of the sanctum, Ghost released the Soul Master, uncaring of how he fell to the ground in a heap as they looked down at Hornet. The amount of soul dripping from her carapace had lessened, but she'd still yet to respond to them. Shaking, they didn't notice how soon, a number of guards had gathered around them and the bug they'd dragged down with them.

Too distracted by the state of their sister to care, they watched as the sentries that they'd previously encountered hurried forth to apprehend the Soul Master. What happened to the other was none of their concern now.

"Goodness, what a sight." Looking up sharply, Ghost's gaze met that of the Watcher. "I must say, when a snail came to warn me, the last thing I expected was this. May I?" Lurien leaned down and opened his arms, prompting them to draw back instinctively before realizing that they had to trust him if they wanted Hornet to be safe. After they placed her in his arms, he straightened up easily. Later, they would find an ounce of amusement in the situation, as Hornet seemed to instinctively curl up closer to him as he turned to head for the lift.

From behind him, a pair of his Watcher Knights stepped forth. "See to it that this place is thoroughly emptied. My missing citizens...?" Lurien glanced back at Ghost only for them to lower their head solemnly. "... I see. I'll let their families know. Thank you. At the very least,

it is a relief to know that no more lives will be lost to this place.” When he stepped into the lift with them, he looked back down at Hornet.

“I’m... I am truly sorry for this. Though, I’ll make sure she’s well taken care of,” he said, the sincerity in his voice being the only reason why Ghost allowed him to continue holding their sister.

As the Watcher led them back up to his spire, they did their best to ignore the sudden silence in their thoughts. Hornet would be ok. They wouldn’t allow themselves to believe otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

hornet explode

Chapter 33: Quirrel 05

Chapter Summary

Quirrel returns to the Capitol.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quirrel looked up at the leaking cave ceiling with a wince. He disliked the prospect of setting foot back into the raining city, but he had to at this point. Despite his thorough investigation of Deepnest- which was thankfully lacking any more dangerous encounters thanks to its Queen's blessing -he'd found not a trace of what he was looking for.

Herrah herself had spoken of the red and grey cloaked strangers, but it was quite apparent that they were no longer anywhere within her domain. So, his next best bet was the most populated place in the kingdom.

The City of Tears was his former home, but as he hurried through the streets, his hood growing damper with each passing moment, he couldn't help but remember that there was a reason he'd left the place.

Thankfully, he didn't need to travel far to reach his destination. The Spire was the tallest building in Hallownest, and also the easiest to find. To his confusion, he found the building quite busy when he entered. Some of the bugs who frequented the place hoping to catch a glimpse of their city's caretaker were being ushered outside, and when one of the sentries caught sight of him, he winced as he realized-

"My apologies but we're no longer accepting visitors for the time bei- wait, *Quirrel?"* The guard's gaze switched from stoic to excited within a second, and all too quickly he realized there would be no escape from what was about to happen. "I can't believe it! I haven't seen you in forever. Last I heard you were-"

"Discharged, yes, but that isn't why I'm here," he said quickly, hoping to avoid any further scrutiny. "What's going on?" At that, his former classmate gave him a pitying look- further solidifying his regret at coming back -before pointing upwards.

"The Watcher has some very important guests that have performed a rather impressive service to the city. He's currently dealing with them at the top of the spire, but he's insisted that we empty the rest of the floors for security purposes. Only those who have official business are allowed in," they responded. Something about those words made him twitch with anticipation.

“Well,” Quirrel mumbled, “I... suppose it’s a good thing that’s why I’m here then!” His voice sounded completely unconvincing, and some part of him felt disgusting for manipulating the other bug, but if his hunch was correct-

“Really? Feel free to take the lift to the top in that case!” They didn’t even question him, and their cheerful response only made him feel worse. But, he couldn’t break the ruse now.

Nodding sharply, he headed to where the metal carriage was, only to stop when he heard them call his name once more.

“Oh, and Quirrel? I’m sorry again, for what happened.” Their eyes met his and Quirrel gripped the hilt of his nail to stop himself from tearing up as he pressed the lever to send the elevator up.

“I am too.”

Unsurprisingly, the higher floors of the spire were just as empty as the ones below. His journey to the top of the building was only impeded once more, by a pair of heavyset knights- the Watcher’s personal guard, he realized -that were standing just before the last elevator. To his relief, they only looked him over briefly before allowing him to pass, but the rest of the ride up left him to his nerves.

The Watcher would undoubtedly be there, but what could he say? He didn’t truly have any business that would require the presence of the City of Tear’s very own caretaker. The Keeper of the Spire had no reason to entertain him, but Quirrel wanted- no, *needed* to see if he was right, to figure out what was pulling him back and forth across Hallownest while filling his dreams with false memories.

As long as the ride to the top was, it still ended too soon, and Quirrel winced at the noise the lift made as it reached its destination. However, the space before him was empty.

Making his way into the room, he glanced around, but there wasn’t a single bug present. However, before the confusion could take hold properly, Quirrel heard a voice come from somewhere. Carefully drawing closer to where he thought it was coming from, he found a dividing curtain, and slowly pushed it aside.

“...the damage to her shell was quite extensive, though I’ve no doubt that she’ll recover with time. Your sister strikes me as a hardy sort, if I’m not wrong?” The Watcher was at the other end of the room hidden by the curtain cover, but across from them-

His soft gasp of surprise drew the attention of two of the room’s occupants, their gazes snapping to him immediately.

“I- ah, pardon the intrusion-” Quirrel stumbled over his words as the other bugs stared at him. “I’m very sorry but I heard- I heard that-!”

“Come in already, and please lower your voice,” the Watcher’s eye was trained on him even as he stepped into the room, suddenly feeling shakier than before. The grey cloaked bug was there! He’d finally found them again! But, the other-

It was then that he noticed Hornet. Upon seeing her, Quirrel realized she was very much asleep, and soon his embarrassment threatened to reach peak levels.

“This is... less than optimal,” he mumbled, only to feel a tug on his cloak. When he turned to look at the grey-cloaked bug, he found them patting the pillows beside themselves. “Oh, why thank you.” Sitting down next to them, an image drifted into his head. They’d done this before, on a bench instead of a cushioned room- but at the same time, he thought, how could they have?

“Normally I wouldn’t allow visitors to my room without proper reason,” the Watcher’s voice brought him back to the present, and Quirrel found himself under further scrutiny. “However... I was already informed ahead of time of your eventual return to the city.”

“I... *what?”* Quirrel asked, weakly. In response, Lurien only tilted his head slightly.

“You’re a former guard trainee, released from your position following a tragically unsuccessful instruction period before being relocated to a private institute in Fog Canyon. That is from the records the city has on you, but that isn’t how I knew you’d be here. How is Monomon, by the way?” His words gave Quirrel whiplash, and for a brief moment, he was thankful he was already sitting.

“She’s, well, she’s busy, but that’s to be expected,” Had Monomon foreseen his coming here? The shaking was back. “That isn’t why I’ve come, though. I was- oh this isn’t what I had planned at all.” He shuttered. “I came here looking for you,” he said to the grey cloaked bug, half hoping that admitting the truth would make him feel less dizzy. It didn’t.

He didn’t know why, but he’d expected their lack of an answer. Though, they did sit up sharply, as if they couldn’t quite believe he’d come in search of them.

“Back in the wastes, you did something to me. I don’t know what it was but,” Quirrel kept his hands clasped together tightly, averting his gaze from them, “I feel like I know you- or, perhaps, that I should know you? I can’t explain it, but I... I was hoping that if I found you again, I’d be able to get some answers to everything that’s been happening.”

The silence that followed his words was deafening. Quirrel felt lightheaded.

After a moment, though, the bug next to him took up one of his hands in between their own. He blinked, looking back into their eyes. What previously registered to him as a vast emptiness was now something else entirely. He didn’t know how to feel about it.

“Ghost... take him with you...” In an instant they were all looking at the previously unconscious bug, who was now sitting up.

“Hornet, you’re not well, please-” Lurien murmured, shifting closer to her even as he held out his hand for her to steady herself with. Gratitude flashed in her gaze when she glanced at

him before she turned to look at Quirrel.

“My sibling- they have a duty that cannot wait for me to recover. It is presumptuous of me, but I would ask that you accompany them on their travels,” she said, her voice soft yet hoarse, “seeing as now, I am unable to.”

Quirrel’s eyes flickered from one sibling to the other. “I... I’d hate to impose. I doubt I’d be much help-” At that, the grey cloaked bug- *Ghost,* he reminded himself -pulled lightly on him. “Ah, do... do you want me to accompany you?”

Across from him, Hornet fixed him with a leveled stare. “They want you to travel with them. Though, for reasons I cannot say.” Quirrel tried to match her gaze, feeling the grip of the bug next to him around his hand. “Will you?”

For a moment, Quirrel felt like the floor was falling away beneath him. Then he looked back at Ghost, who was looking up at them eagerly. He’d come this far to find them, and if he let them go now he might never be able to discover the meaning behind his dreams. He wanted... *he wanted to-*

“I will,” he said, silencing his worries as he squeezed Ghost’s hand back, their claws carefully intertwining with his. Hornet seemed pleased at this and resumed lying down, to Lurien’s relief.

“Then it’s settled,” Hornet sighed, “I was worried, I didn’t want you to have to continue your search alone. At least now, you won’t have to...” Almost immediately after she’d finished speaking, it was clear that she’d fallen asleep once more.

Briefly, Quirrel felt a stab of fear as he wondered what he’d just signed himself up for, but before he could second-guess himself, Lurien had already tucked in Hornet with a thin blanket and was now ushering both him and Ghost out of the room.

“We’ll keep her safe until she’s healthy enough to resume traveling, but for now, I’m sure you’d like to be on your way,” he said, bowing his head slightly as Ghost left Quirrel’s side to stand in front of Lurien. Quirrel froze when he saw the shorter bug grasp the hilt of their nail as they stared at the Keeper of the Spire for a moment, the threat likely over whether Lurien’s promise to look after their sister. “I don’t begrudge you your wariness. I promised that you’d both be unharmed within my city and yet-” He stopped briefly, an almost regretful air settling about him. “You can be assured, I’ll attend to her personally for as long as she’s here. You have my word, and the continued secrecy of your presence here for as long as you travel within Hallownest.”

At that, Ghost nodded before motioning to Quirrel once more. As he moved to follow them, Lurien caught him by the shoulder.

“Do tell Monomon hello for me, yes?” Still unnerved by the entire encounter, Quirrel simply nodded in response and hurried after his new traveling companion the moment he felt the Watcher release him.

As Ghost looked up at him with what appeared to be amusement, he could only sigh good naturedly. He would make the best of these circumstances, or, at the very least, he'd try to.

Chapter End Notes

as of now my buffer is officially emptied. New chapters resume in two weeks!

Chapter 34: Ghost 18

Chapter Summary

Quirrel Returns™ (for a brief visit to monomom)

Chapter Notes

Uhhh everyone just please ignore that this is a day late big thanks big thanks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, is there any particular reason why we're headed to the Archives?" Ghost looked up sharply from their seat atop the stag at Quirrel's question, noting how he pointedly kept his gaze away from their face. "Not that I don't enjoy being there, but my teacher explicitly forbade me to return until I found-"

When he paused, they slid closer to him in the carriage, watching as his expression turned distant. "Until I... found what I was looking for." As he turned to look back at them, they jumped slightly at the feeling of his hand wrapping around theirs. "Perhaps..."

In response to his odd statement, Ghost simply sat there and let their claws close around his, ignoring the jostling moments of the stag running below them as they leaned into Quirrel's side.

"Your sister, your voice, she is gone." Forcing themselves to still their body as the Radiance hummed to awareness, Ghost focused their thoughts inward.

'Yes... Hornet was injured by the Soul Master, she's with Lurien now, until she heals,' they responded, trying not to let the hurt pervade their senses. *'Its for the best she not accompany us in such a state.'*

Ghost could feel the Radiance mulling over their words even as the stag slowed to a stop, the Queen's station signs above their head showing they were at their destination. As they climbed out of the carriage and followed Quirrel up into the canyon, they absently listened to his worried mumbling, their hand still connected with his.

"That may be for the best in her case. However, it will be difficult for you to communicate with others, lacking a voice as you do," she said, a distant feeling of concern washing over them as the image of the Radiance's wings folding around their much smaller body appeared in their mind. " *How do you suppose you'll go about explaining yourself to the last of the*

wyrm's supposed seals?" Her question sat within their mind and Ghost reflexively squeezed Quirrel's hand a little harder.

'I will... see to that problem as the need arises,' they replied, re-focusing themselves on the world around them as the visage of the Old Light in their mind once again faded into the background and they became aware enough to just catch the tail end of Quirrel's speech.

"-sure that Monomon won't mind that I can't exactly stay at the archives even though you're here with me. After all, I made a promise to your sister, and a warrior's word is his life, yes? My teacher is very understanding and I can see no reason why she'll insist I end my travels now!" he said, a sort of fake exuberance tainting his voice, while Ghost shook their head slightly. It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself rather than reassure them.

Giving his hand a light pat with their own free one, they pulled him along as they drew closer to the Archives.

Once they were within the Archives, Ghost noted how Quirrel's body seemed to naturally relax. When the other acolytes noticed him, he became more excitable, his greetings to the rest of Monomon's students were completely unlike the nervous side they'd seen him express in the City of Tears. In a way, it reminded them of the Quirrel they'd known in the future-past.

"Ah... I did so miss it here," he mused, a fond sigh escaping him before he looked down at them. "That isn't to say I haven't enjoyed my time away-! No, it's truly been enlightening to see the lands outside of the canyon, but, this place, it's my home." Ghost could feel his affection for the archives in his voice, and for a brief moment, they leaned against his shoulder as he re-familiarized himself with the place.

"...Quirrel? Is that you?" At the sound of an unfamiliar, almost airily soft voice, Quirrel was gone from Ghost's side in an instant, leaving them staring at the spot where he once stood before they realized he was now across the room, standing next to-

"Monomon! I mean- Madame! I've returned, as you can see." As Ghost slowly made their way back to his side, they watched him lean into a bow that had him practically folding in half. A breath of amusement escaped them as they caught up to him and inclined their head slightly in Monomon's direction, noticing how she turned to them with surprise.

"That is... well, Quirrel? I assume you found what you were looking for, but-" Monomon's voice quickly became a whisper, and Quirrel let out a quiet noise of surprise as his teacher's tentacles wrapped around his wrist before Ghost found themselves in a similar position as they were pulled towards her office.

It was only after they were in the enclosed space with the door shut tight behind them that Ghost was forced to deal with Monomon's sudden change in demeanor as she let go of Ghost so she could use two of her tentacles to pick up Quirrel and shake him.

“One of the King’s vessels, Quirrel!?” she half-screamed, half-snapped out. “When I told you to go out there and find who you were looking for, I did *not* mean you should do so by stealing the King’s property! This is an act tantamount to high treason!”

Staring at the scene that was unfolding before them, Ghost couldn’t help but sigh inwardly. They didn’t know which was worse, seeing Quirrel tossed around like a rag doll, or being told that they were considered in any way property of the wyrm.

With a sharp huff, they felt their body shift as a pair of void-tentacles materialized from their back and carefully plucked the other bug out of Monomon’s hold, effortlessly holding him aloft above them as they pointed a finger at his surprised teacher before shaking their head.

“I- Ghost, Ghost please put me down!” Quirrel shuttered out, dropping to the ground in a relieved heap the moment Ghost set him on the floor. “Madame... you have it all wrong! They don’t belong to the King. I met them in the wastes at first and then, ah... in the Capitol.”

Glancing back at him, Ghost barely noticed Monomon’s tentacles prodding their own, only a vague recognition of their extra limbs registering in their mind as they knelt at Quirrel’s side, patting him on the back as he slowly regained his breath.

“Remarkable... I was only permitted to see one of the King’s creations, the Pure vessel, and yet,” when she pulled lightly on them, Ghost turned and fixed her with a poignant stare. “I take it you’re offended by my labeling you as a belonging. A fair response, you are quite unlike what I expected.”

After Quirrel’s breathing had once again evened out, he gasped as Ghost lifted him up and set him on his feet before recalling the void into themselves, their shell rippling briefly as their body settled.

“They’re- they’re very special, yes. Though, personally, I’m still not sure why they wanted to come here. I only returned on their insistence, you see.” Monomon seemed intrigued by Quirrel’s words, and this time when she extended a limb towards Ghost, they reached out and grasped it, ignoring how she seemed to startle at their boldness.

“The King once asked me to design something for him. Plans to create a being that could not think for itself, nor bear any senses that could be manipulated by an outside- or should I say, inside source,” she murmured, carefully extracting her tentacle from Ghost’s grip before floating over to one of the luminous tanks within the room, words and symbols floating within. “He later explained that he’d be fashioning these beings out of pieces from himself and the Queen, yet...” When she turned her gaze back towards them, they saw a sort of regret surfacing within. “You do not seem like an unfeeling thing at all. In fact, I have reason now to believe the King lied to me in his initial report.”

Her voice underwent a sudden shift from dismay to tense anger, and a quick glance at Quirrel showed that even he had noticed.

“Madame, if you’re correct then what of the plan?” he asked, a hand coming up to lightly pull on his hood as Monomon floated in place, her tentacles waving absently as she thought.

“The plan, yes, that... The plan the King wanted me to have a part in-” she mumbled out, picking up a few glowing tubes in her tentacles as she looked over them, before letting them fall and shatter on the ground. Quirrel’s gasp of surprise at the act mirrored Ghost’s own as they watched her sweep through the rows of glass containers, sending them all to the floor where they broke into pieces. “Does he think he can simply *lie* to me and get away with it? He would’ve jeopardized my archives? My years spent studying and researching and cataloging all the knowledge our world has to offer, only for a sacrifice that was destined to fail since the beginning? I know of his foresight, but this... this! Oh if I ever get the chance to have my tentacles around his neck I’ll-”

With a motion only capable thanks to their trained reflexes, Ghost pulled Quirrel out of the way of a flying tube as it sailed past where his head was only a moment ago before crashing into the wall behind him, the words stored within dissipating in the air as the glass and liquid melted away on contact.

“M- madame, maybe you should calm down! Now that we know of the King’s intent to mislead we can look into other solutions?” he asked, yelping when she turned towards him sharply.

“This will be discussed after I deal with the situation at hand. I refuse to be a part of this grand ruse any longer,” she snapped, floating towards the back of the room and opening a door cleverly hidden behind the taller tubes still attached to the floor. “Both of you, follow.”

With a quick glance at Quirrel, Ghost let him go and hurried after Monomon, hearing him finally gather himself and rush to meet them a second later.

Whatever the Teacher had to show them must be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

If all goes well this fic will be updating every 3-4 days so, cheers to that! hope ya'll had a nice holiday! I can't wait to see what's in store for us next year!

Chapter 35: Quirrel 06

Chapter Summary

> Ghost is introduced to the protector of the Archives.

Chapter Notes

> alright so, this chapter isn't my favorite. in fact you could say it's my least favorite chapter out of this whole fic, but now that it's done I never have to revisit it and hopefully we should be back on track from here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room his mentor had led them both to was enormous, and Quirrel blinked as he quickly scanned the walls, his mind subconsciously trying to figure out how she managed to fit such a space into the Archives themselves. At his side, Ghost tilted their head this way and that, while Monomon floated next to him and pointed at a tube at the center of the chamber.

“When the wyrm first approached me with his ideas, I’ll admit I was a bit zealous in my reactions to his claims, but if what he foresaw came to pass...” Monomon grew silent as Ghost hopped down from the ledge and approached the tube, pressing their hands and face against the surface. Before Quirrel could move to join them, a tentacle pulled back on his shoulder, the surprised noise he made in response barely audible above the sound of metal bars clattering into place. Turning sharply, he saw another one of Monomon’s tentacles atop a concealed switch on the opposite wall.

“Ma’am? What-” Quirrel jumped back when a metal gate slammed down in front of him, the bars separating him and Monomon from the rest of the room. “Why did you-?” the question fell from his mouth unbidden even as he caught Ghost’s gaze, a sharp look of surprise on their face despite the unmoving quality of their mask. When he returned to awareness, he found himself clutching the bars.

Within the room, the tube that Ghost had been focused on opened up, the top sliding off to reveal-

“Madame- no, you can’t!” he cried, spinning about to face Monomon, who watched the unfolding scene with grim interest.

“I *must,* Quirrel.” Her tone left no room for argument, but the horror that rose up within him threatened to drown out his senses as he turned back to see Uumuu- the creation that was

supposed to protect the Archives in Monomon's absence -lazily drift out of its containment. Quirrel's hands clutched desperately at the bars as he peered inward, his heart racing as he watched the sentient creature he'd created with his Teacher float towards Ghost.

He didn't want to see them get stung by Uumuu's electrical conductors- he knew just how much damage their construct could do. Quirrel screwed his eyes shut and pressed his face against the metal, unwilling to witness it happen.

Except, the sound of crackling sparks never came. When he risked opening his eyes and looking up into the other room, Uumuu was floating in front of Ghost, gently prodding at them with its tentacles while they poked at it with their own in turn. The two seemed fascinated by each other, and Ghost in particular appeared to be highly enthused by the presence of the gelatinous sentinel, using their extra appendages to lift themselves up so they could sit atop Uumuu's bell.

At this, Monomon leaned forward, her tentacles waving excitedly. "Truly extraordinary..." she whispered, while Quirrel tried to push away the panic that had been building up in his chest.

"Is- is this what you wanted?" he asked tentatively, even as she moved to release the switch and raise the gates. Monomon drifted into the room without answering him, and Quirrel followed behind her.

When Ghost noticed them both, they looked completely unbothered, raising a hand to wave at Quirrel while lightly patting Uumuu with the other. He wanted to smile at them, to pretend that he hadn't been fearing for their life mere moments ago.

"I must say, my actions just now weren't what most would call scientific, but..." Monomon leaned in towards Ghost, who gave her an appraising look. "Perhaps my visions weren't quite so worrisome," she said, before turning away.

"Lady Monomon-" Quirrel started, only to pause as his teacher moved to hold the sides of his face, her gaze solemn as she beheld him.

"Quirrel, the King was wrong, my part played in this Kingdom's perpetuation was for naught, but there appears to be hope for us yet," she declared, and he held her stare briefly before glancing behind her to see Ghost descending from atop Uumuu, who gave them a leisurely pat on the head before returning to its containment chamber. "They quite obviously have a plan- a goal -if they sought me out specifically. Continue on your travels, my dear student."

Why did that feel so familiar?

Ghost's hand was on his shoulder now, and if he turned his head slightly, he could catch them looking at him with concern simmering in their gaze. Quirrel blinked. They'd been here together before, hadn't they? Except they'd only just arrived and-

"...we arrive together... recall...to save Hallownest... in aid of you..."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Quirrel's hands came up to clutch at his head, a weak noise of distress escaping him as his legs buckled beneath him. The cries of his Teacher were fading in and out, and he was drowning in a pair of pitch black eyes.

"...the choice... this must be done... on your journey... bear this kingdom's fate..."

Again, the noise returned, but this time he welcomed it as it consumed him.

Chapter End Notes

god this might be the longest ive gone between posting chapters for this fic? Im sorry you guys :'D

Chapter 36: Ghost 19

Chapter Summary

Ghost has a chat with Quirrel and Monomon.

Chapter Notes

ohhhhHHh my god im BACK

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You know, I sent Quirrel out into Hallownest to find what he was looking for. I suppose something could be said about him, for how he found it without realizing." Monomon's words filtered into the air like a stream of bubbles, and Ghost looked up sharply from where they were perched at a still-sleeping Quirrel's bedside.

'He was looking for me?' the whispered tones of their voice were inaudible to her, yet spoken all the same. Ghost's hands began to tremble as they looked back at him. When he'd dropped in Monomon's study some few hours ago, they'd panicked. The void making up their body had become unstable, their shell changing and shifting as they tried to keep hold of both Quirrel and themself. In the end, it had taken The Radiance's control and Monomon's reassurance that Quirrel would be fine to get them to settle once more.

It was the first time they allowed the higher being nestled in their being to take over their body completely as they focused on reigning in their emotions. Part of them wanted to deny how good it felt to not have to worry or think about what they were doing while her essence spread through their shell- her warmth in their chest as they drew their thoughts inward.

They thought it strange to say thank you after, but The Radiance simply returned to the back of their mind when it was over, leaving them with a distant contentedness and the faint sensation of wings over their shoulders.

Folding one of Quirrel's hands in between their own, they wondered how much of their influence was still affecting him.

"I had dreams of this. At first I was worried they were because of the plague. It was a known symptom at the time, and with my duty to the wyrm, it seemed a valid cause for concern," Monomon continued, "Yet, I was never bothered with the visions of grandeur that appeared so common among the rest of Hallownest's citizens. Perhaps I should have paid them more

heed.” One of her tentacles came to settle over Quirrel’s head, a soft hum building before a brief spark jumped between them.

“Ah! I thought I told you not to wake me like that again-!?” The formerly unconscious bug sat up with a sharp jolt, nearly knocking Ghost over as he flailed with surprise for a moment before remembering whose company he was in. “Oh- oh goodness, did it happen again?” he asked, raising a hand up to his face.

In the end, Ghost couldn’t stop themself from throwing their arms around his shoulders and holding him tight. His surprised gasp almost made them let go immediately, but after a second or two, he tentatively returned the embrace, allowing them to nestle in against his side as relief flooded their body.

“Quirrel, this has happened more than once?” Monomon asked, curiosity tinging her voice.

“I- yes,” he managed out, as they took advantage of his distraction to shift even closer. “It occurred once when I was in the wastes, right after I saw-” Quirrel paused, glancing down at them as they squeezed him the slightest bit tighter. “It was after I saw you..”

Ghost’s thoughts rolled tumultuously with everything they wanted to say to him. That they wanted his help *but not at the expense of his wellbeing,* to see him again, to share their travels with him as they once had- they drew away and made a feeble motion of clawing at their own throat, frustrated with their body before The Radiance’s power latched onto that potent emotion and surged forth, setting their eyes alight with her golden glow.

“We came to help,” they said- yet didn’t. Ghost reeled as their voice flowed forth like honey as both Monomon and Quirrel stared at them with surprise, *“From a time beyond the kingdom’s fall, we know what will happen if the wyrm’s plan comes to pass- if his influence in these lands continues. You, Teacher, are the last piece needed to pull everything apart.”*

Mentor and student met each other’s eyes, and Ghost could see Quirrel hesitate to move. Even now, the trust they and The Radiance were putting in him and Monomon was palpable. Either of them at this point could still believe in the wyrm enough to turn tail and relay that the heart of the plague *wasn’t* sealed inside his Pure Vessel like he believed it to be.

Even The Radiance seemed to be holding her breath, shared in Ghost’s chest as they waited for the other two to speak.

“I will help you.” Monomon broke the silence, her tentacles unwinding as she dipped her head into a slight bow. “I believe in Hallownest, but the Pale King has proven himself untrustworthy, and if there is another way...”

“You must not alert him to our presence. Our strength is not yet returned, and the Ghost of Hallownest is proof of his failings. Were he to find us, we will be rendered powerless once more. Stay your hand and leave no trace of us when we depart.” Ghost almost choked on gold as The Radiance’s energy receded, the last of Her returning to the depths of their being, leaving them feeling warm and somewhat comforted as they gazed back at Monomon with their pitch black stare.

“It will be done,” she said firmly. “Quirrel-” The bug in question let go of them reluctantly.

“Ma’am?” His head tilted, and Ghost caught him shooting glances in their direction even as he stood and focused on his mentor.

Monomon glided forward to curl her tentacles against the sides of his head, his hands instinctually latching onto her as she pressed her forehead to his. “For your safety and mine, I ask you to follow them. A journey of such great importance as this cannot be ignored, and I must remain behind to play my part here,” she whispered, glowing flecks alighting on Quirrel’s mask as he blinked up at her. “You have my blessing.. go forth, and be safe, my Student.”

When he stepped back towards Ghost’s side, they lightly tapped his shoulder before taking his hand in theirs, savoring the contact.

“My work regarding the creation of the vessels- the King’s children -it must be destroyed before...” Monomon warbled to herself, tiny arcs of electricity jumping between the ends of her tentacles. “I will ensure that all records of their construction are removed from the Archives. It will be as though they never existed. Some knowledge should never be kept. I thank you, for bringing me the truth.”

Ghost bowed slightly, pulling Quirrel along even as he paused to glance back at her, watching as Monomon began plucking various tubes off the shelves and draining them in the acid pool below, the information within dissolving away.

Chapter End Notes

my tumblr is raerengue if u wanna come yell at me abt this fic !

Chapter 37: Ghost 20

Chapter Summary

Mom?????????

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was their luck, they supposed, that Quirrel had enough chatter in him for the both of them as they pulled him in the direction of the Queen's Gardens. While he talked about the various flora that surrounded them, they made their way over budding thorn bushes and around bubbling pools of acid, squeezing his hand ever so slightly with theirs whenever he started to wander. It was endearing, how his inquisitive nature so often pulled at him.

And while he talked, they realized they'd been forgetting something.

'Thank you.' Ghost's thoughts turned inward, gratitude filling them as they sought out the edge of the Radiance's mind, her formerly vague attention now focused on them as well as they sensed her confusion at their words. *'For giving me a voice- for helping. It was an unnecessary use of power, and yet you assisted me regardless.'* Her first reaction was surprise, then understanding.

"It means very little," she said, *"to share that which naturally comes to most. The wyrm's seal on your own voice is weak. Stronger than I am now, yet were I recovered..."* Ghost didn't dare allow the spark of hope in their chest to grow into anything more. *"Nevertheless... The Teacher needed to be convinced I was not a threat to her. She believes what she can see and feel. In a way, I respect it, and her pursuit for such truths."*

If they could've smiled, they would have at her somewhat sentimental tone.

'What of Quirrel? You knew we would need him on this journey, yes? Did you not intend to convince him as well?' Ghost noted her abrupt silence before her warmth was back, trailing up their arms before settling on their shoulders like a blanket.

"I did not see him as a requirement for our travels, but he is useful, and you are..." she seemed to struggle for the right word, a knot tying itself in their chest briefly as they felt a slight frustration that wasn't their own. *"You are endeared to him. He is unlike your sister, but he will serve his purpose all the same."* Before, they would've been put off by her response, but as the faintest hint of worry for them bled through past her aloofness, Ghost knew what her response was about.

"Worry not, Light. Our pact holds, and until you are restored my utmost priority is-" they were abruptly drawn out of their thoughts as Quirrel let go of their hand to push open a gate

in front of them.

When they stepped past the threshold, they felt the Radiance shudder in their head. “It’s not that I doubt your sense of direction, but I don’t suppose you have a reason for us trespassing into the Queen’s private retreat?” Quirrel asked as they passed him, Ghost glancing back for a moment before raising a hand, then lowering it. The Radiance must have sensed their mother somewhere within the gardens.

Nodding, they continued onwards, not waiting for Quirrel to catch up- as he did in two bounds. “I’m assuming your reason must be a good one then.”

They nodded, guiding him along as they took in the neatly kept gardens, the verdant surroundings still well groomed and maintained, unlike the overgrown swathes that had run wild in the future. The mantis traitors would never take hold of their mother’s private sanctuary now. Though whether or not that would contribute to the upkeep of the place was yet to be seen.

Ghost somewhat hoped they’d never run into the place’s protector as well. Marmu was a zealous being.

“Such a peaceful locale... it’s almost a shame at how few know of this place.” Quirrel’s cheery tone almost snuffed out the caution that Ghost still held as they looked around with all the energy of a dashing squit. The plants hadn’t overrun the gardens- the stone paths were clear, and they knew exactly who would be at the end of the path waiting for them.

They weren’t quite looking forward to it.

The Queen of Hallownest was her own kind of formidable. She was a higher being, a half to the whole light that they assembled from her and the wyrm’s fractured soul. With the charm now fully consumed by void, they wondered if it was possible for her to feel the remnants of herself within them. Perhaps not. But surely she’d feel the Radiance’s power, beating deep in their chest like a second heart.

Their mother had a power all herself. Ghost hoped they wouldn’t have to try and stand against it.

“Halt!” The shouted command made them stop immediately, a hand on the hilt of their nail before they even realized what they were doing. Quirrel jumped slightly at their side, glancing around while Ghost looked upwards, a shimmering figure jumping down from above them and onto the ground below.

Fierce Dryya, the Queen’s own knight, stood before them.

“Should you intruders seek to defile this garden, know that I will not hesitate to cut you down where you stand,” she said clearly, and Ghost hesitated. They remembered her- they remembered seeing her slumped over corpse outside of their mother’s self-imposed prison, swathes of dead mantis traitors littering the ground around her. Dryya would fight to the death. She *had* fought to the death. They didn’t want to see her lifeless body a second time.

“Ah- you have our most sincere apologies, that isn’t our intention!” Quirrel began to speak, holding up his hands placatingly. “We’re simply- we, uh, Ghost, why did we come here?” His confused look was quite endearing, and Ghost tilted their head, a mental giggle echoing in their mind before they let go of their nail. There was another presence drawing closer, and as soon as a pale glow began to drift into view, they knew that Dryya was the least of their worries now.

The Pale Root was a vaguely terrifying figure to them, her ever-growing crest of branches spreading outward from her head like a halo of many claws, and her eyes which shimmered like crystal could only reflect their visage back at them. They froze in her path as she stepped forth from beyond the clusters of dewy flowers and curling vines, her gaze unlike the one sided misty pools of blue they remembered.

“Stand down, Dryya,” she said, voice soft even as surprise tinged its edges. Had she known they’d come to her, as she’d told them before? Her knight reluctantly lowered her weapon, glancing between her master and Ghost before gasping. “Pure...?”

They almost couldn’t help it. Their heart sank as their sibling’s name fell from her mouth, void bubbling just beneath the surface of her shell. If only- *if only*-

Root shook her head slowly, leaning forward and squinting slightly, her vinelike arms unwinding from around her body to reach out for them, only to recoil when they leaned away. “No... not my Pure. It is another like them,” she whispered, almost in awe as she straightened herself out. “I- I know it is not my place to ask anything of you, but... if you would come this way?”

When she turned around to depart, Dryya fixed them with a stare before moving to follow her lady, leaving Quirrel and Ghost standing where they were, hesitant to follow.

“We.. we should listen to her, of course. She’s the Queen of Hallowne-” Quirrel stopped short as he took a step forward, Ghost’s hand having shot out to grip his tightly, pulling him back for a moment before they dared to inch in the direction their mother had gone. “My friend, are you well?”

They weren’t. Yet, they still had to press onward, and after a few seconds, they allowed Quirrel to guide them to where the White Lady was leading them, leaving a trail of black behind with each step.

Chapter End Notes

ya'll are never gonna BELIEVE the endgame pairing i have in mind for this fic now
edit: ill give you a hint, i briefly poke at it in this chapter

Chapter 38: Quirrel 07

Chapter Summary

A conversation, of sorts.

Chapter Notes

Merry (Early) Christmas, folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quirrel glanced up from the teacup in his hands. He ignored how it shook in his grasp as he raised it to his mouth, taking the smallest sip he possibly could of the aromatic liquid before lowering it back to his lap. His entire body felt as though it were buzzing with electricity. *Oomas in his head,* he mused, in a feeble attempt to stave off his nervousness at being seated beside a true royal of Hallownest.

To her credit, the Queen was taking everything in stride. Despite her uninvited guests.

“Would you like some more tea, scholar?” she asked, glittering blue eyes turning towards him as he tried to avoid letting his cup and saucer rattle in his hold.

“I- no thank you, your majesty. You’re very kind,” he managed out, forcing his eyes back onto Ghost.

Ever since they’d entered the Queen’s personal parlor, they’d sat down at the chair offered to them and hadn’t moved since. There was not a twitch or even a tilt of their head to inform Quirrel of how they were feeling at the moment. Perhaps they were as nervous as he was? He doubted it.

Across from them, Dryya stood guard, her hand never leaving the hilt of her nail. Quirrel tried not to think about how easy a well-trained knight like her could skewer him should he step out of line with the Queen. The clinking grew louder.

“I feel as though.. I must apologize for my assumption earlier. My eyes grow weary in these times, and my thoughts wrap around themselves like twining branches, but that is no excuse for confusing one of my children for another,” the Queen said softly, and Quirrel finally lost his grip on his teacup. “You are of my brood, yes? I can sense it, faintly. You’ve buried those parts of myself within you so far beneath that essence from where... well, I’m sure you know.”

Slowly, unsteadily, Quirrel picked up his cup and set it aside, fixing Ghost with an imploring expression before jolting slightly when their head turned away from him.

“Your majesty- surely you don’t meant that they’re-” he started, only for her to nod before he could finish.

Ghost looked up at her with a motion so smooth it was almost robotic. “Yes, it seems that way. Forgive my boldness.. but, do you resent me?” she asked. They nodded sharply, and she closed her eyes, lowering her head slightly. “I do not blame you. My part to play in my husband’s plans was but one of compliance, yet I did so out of selfishness. I will not ask for your forgiveness, little one. I do not deserve it.”

They didn’t seem to acknowledge her words. “However, while my mind still remains whole, I would ask of you.. nay, I would beg, for if there is any goodness left in me, if only because you might be the only one to understand,” she said softly, almost as though it pained her to speak. “Please free your sibling- the Pure Vessel.. my dear wyrm’s knight. He has foreseen it, their failure, and yet our child is doomed to sacrifice for his mistakes. I have already seen many of my offspring perish at my husband’s hand. I do not want to lose another.” Quirrel felt as though a rope was slowly tightening around his neck. Here he was, sitting before the Queen of Hallownest as she spoke of death and children and the King’s hand in all of it. His trembling hands stilled as Ghost wrapped their claws around his wrist, solid and grounding.

A pulse of heat, the glow in his companion’s eyes became a telling sign, and Quirrel had to hastily tamp down the panic that immediately rose up in his chest. Everything would be fine, he reassured himself, as lights began to exude from their mask.

“This is odd behavior for you, Root. To willingly accept being forgotten is to accept death,” they said, a voice not their own dripping out in slow, languid motions, as if the speaker was savoring the act of talking. *“I have never seen one so eager to give up dominion, not since my sisters left the heavens to lay claim to the land beneath their wings.”* A jolt of recognition tugged at his chest, Quirrel’s gaze averting itself from the steadily increasing light that shone from Ghost’s mask. He was in the presence of gods, and it was not his place to interfere with such a discussion.

Surprisingly, the Queen merely nodded, ignoring the palpable shock coming from her own knight, as Dryya stared with abject horror at Ghost.

“Radiance... why am I not surprised?” Hallownest’s matriarch sighed long and deep and her branches trembled above. “I knew they could not be undertaking this task alone. I knew that I felt.. some trace of you. This is odd behavior, to submit to another’s hold. Perhaps my wyrm chose the wrong prison to contain you.”

Ghost’s body jolted sharply. *‘I am not CONTAINED I am-!’* a half-scream of frustration, a hiss, then silence, before- *‘I agreed to this... arrangement, as it were. A mutually beneficial partnership.* This *vessel suits me just fine,”* the Radiance snapped out, and Quirrel could see Ghost’s hands smoothing over themselves, as though they were trying to calm down the Goddess within their shell. It seemed to work, as only a moment later, the glow vanished, and they straightened up once more, fully themself again.

“I see,” the Queen said, nodding to herself. “I am assuming this means you will do as I ask?”

For not the first time, Quirrel wondered what he was getting himself into as Ghost nodded, immediately turning to leave without so much as a farewell. Standing abruptly, he glanced between them and the Queen before dropping into a steep bow at the waist and stammering out a quick word of thanks for Her Majesty’s hospitality before hurrying after his traveling partner, but not before catching Dryya’s words as they left.

“My Queen, forgive my bluntness, but your spawn is much more terrifying than I ever imagined.”

Chapter End Notes

Hm. I really did not like working on this chapter. Sorry for the long wait though! I'm going to try and pick this back up and be more consistent next year. Thanks for the patience & kind words, everyone :)

Chapter 39: Interlude 03 | Pure

Chapter Summary

Pure sees a figure from the past.

Chapter Notes

Sorry (again) for the long wait (again)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For once, *for once,* it didn't hurt.

The fire in their chest was quiet, and Pure indulged themself just this once. Greenpath was quiet, most of its inhabitants preferring to stay out of sight as they watched the pale creature dance and spin through the foliage.

They felt better than ever.

Nail in hand, they swung their weapon in wide, lazy arcs. Dropping the tight, formal stance they'd been trained to use, they simply twirled around, their learned gracefulness falling away as they moved with clumsy, playful strides and swipes.

Then they stopped. The world was quiet, the space around them was consumed with silence, not even a single leaf dared to bend in the breeze.

Looking up, they met the gaze of-

Pure held their breath, their creator beckoned them forth. They were consumed by the order. Follow. Follow.

The darkness was screaming in the back of their head, calling them home, begging them to return to it. They glanced back-

They returned to the present on their knees, gasping, heaving as the shadow from their past stepped closer and closer. They couldn't breathe, they couldn't see anything else except that

haunting face, the image of their sibling burned into their mind. They were a traitor, they deserved this torment, they deserved the pain once again building in them-

Pure screamed as a lance of complete darkness speared through their chest, their head thrown back as the sound was trapped in their throat, unable to escape. They writhed as the fire returned, every inch of their body consumed with searing heat for a second before...

Nothing.

Shaking, they slowly faced forward once more, and small hands grasped the side of their face and forced them to stare directly into the eyes of that specter from the past. Tears were spilling from the white mask that looked so much like theirs. *I'm sorry,* they wanted to say, *I'm sorry I left you behind.*

'I know.' Pure reared back in surprise, staring down the figment and noticing how solid they were, how their claws held them steady and how they seemed to be overflowing with feelings that reached across the space between them. *Grief, pain, longing, love*- Pure felt their own hands raise to take the other's face in hand, so they were both holding each other as though they were the last thing tethering them to the real world.

'Hello again.' That voice in their head seemed incredulous, and Pure themself was bewildered at what was happening in the moment. Though as stunned as they were, the tears seemed to return, twice as strong, when they heard the other say, *'I missed you.'*

Pure threw themself forward at their sibling, clutching them tightly and sobbing openly, their crying noiseless but messy, leaving streaks of black across both their faces.

There were so many things they wanted to ask. How did they survive? How did they find them? Where were they all these years? Their arms wrapped around the other and squeezed as though their sibling was their only lifeline. They never wanted to let go again.

'Please... forgive me.' Pure felt an unnatural calm wash over them at the words. When they drew back to look into their sibling's eyes, all they saw was-

Their body wrenched itself away on instinct alone, terror flooding their body at the orange glow behind shifting black, the same glow they'd seen behind their own eyes for so many months. Pure took one step back, then another, and another, and by the time their consciousness was their own again, they were running away at full speed, completely consumed with fear. Whatever it was that took the form of their sibling, it was truly cruel to prey on them in such away.

Tears still streaming from their face, Pure promised themself to never fall for such a trick again.

Chapter End Notes

I really don't like this chapter, it didn't come out the way I wanted it to but three months of fiddling didn't make it any better so its time to move on. I hope the next few are less disappointing

Chapter 40: Ghost 21

Chapter Summary

An Internal Dialogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ghost's hand slowly returned to their side, no longer extended towards the fleeing visage of their sibling as Pure sprinted away, the last impression left in their head one of fear as they stared into the distance.

"I am..." They felt the Radiance start, then stop speaking in their head, her words fading as they knelt to pick up the discarded weapon left at their feet. The hilt of Pure's nail rested in their hand, their grip on it tightening as they sheathed it beside their own. It was too long for them to wield, but that didn't matter. They'd be giving it back.

Quirrel drew close to their side even as they held their position, unmoving from the spot where they stood.

They saw him glance in the direction they were watching, looking back at them expectantly. "Was that.. was that who I think it was?" *Right,* they thought to themself, *he was a part of this.*

Glancing back at Quirrel, they held a finger up to their mask. His eyes widened slightly before he nodded back at them. "I see.. So this was your intention all along?"

Tilting their head, they turned, hesitating slightly before forging onward in a different direction. Pure was safe now, stripped of infection. The tension that long swam in their chest had melted away the instant the deed was done, so excited in their actions that they'd hurt their sibling in their eagerness to free them. It was the most difficult thing they'd ever done, telling themself to not run after the one they'd been trying for so long to reunite with- to save and protect.

There was a reassurance though, knowing that the wyrm had no leverage over them now. They only had a little more to go, their bargain almost complete, the light in their chest was so close to achieving that perfect fullness. A sense of pride washed over them.

Soon, very soon, their journey would be over.

Letting calm take over, they tried not to focus on the guilt they felt at Pure's departure, preferring to continue onward with Quirrel at their side, taking in the sights of Greenpath in

its prime as they traveled the path dedicated to those not of Unn's kind. She must still be awake, they mused, if her lands were looking so healthy.

"That vast God of green was always one to tend to these lands with a careful eye.." The Radiance hummed to life in their mind once more, sharing their sight while they walked. *"I know she retreated during my... decline, as it were.. she hoped that staying out of my way would keep my gaze off her children."*

Focusing inward they pushed through the wall of guilt that the Goddess had erected in their mind.

'You are distressed,' they thought, matter of factly as they sensed the Radiance withdraw further, as though she was trying to escape their scrutiny. *'What is troubling you?'*

Walking in silence, they felt that familiar warmth return to their chest, the heat building before it dispersed evenly throughout the rest of their body, warming their shell in a comforting manner before the Radiance herself settled in the forefront of their mind.

"I am... upset," she started, and they could almost picture her wrapping her wings around her body as though to shield herself. *"Seeing all that is now, knowing what destruction my anger wrought upon these lands... it demeans me so. I considered myself a reasonable being, my children thought me a just and caring creator, yet I debased myself in an attempt to usurp the wyrm's power when he sealed me away."*

Feeling her regret and discomfort, they struggled to find the words to assuage her worries.

"To think.. that had you not shared the same goal as I, it is entirely possible that.." she paused, *"No, I would not deign to allow it in either of our minds."* Even with the admission, they saw a brief flash of the future she envisioned. The two of them tearing each other apart within the Black Egg- gods rending themselves apart until there was nothing left of either. Shuddering, Ghost tried to send back waves of comfort to her while fending off their own worries.

'The things you have foreseen will not come to pass, we are almost finished, your return to full strength is at hand," they pressed the mental image of her at her most powerful, shining and glorious, against her tumultuous thoughts. *'An age ago, I would not have thought any of this possible, and yet..'*

Ghost felt the thin line of tension within dissipate as the Radiance took in their words. *'Perhaps light and dark have been fighting against each other for too long. Perhaps it was not dominion over each other that we should have sought, but-'*

"Balance." It resounded in their head, and a rush of comfort filled them. *"I have always warred with the void, the dark that I could not erase, the shadows my Light could not chase away. Yet I fear you no longer, Little Shadow. I am... thankful, for your presence."*

Now the warmth in their chest had nothing to do with her power, but they leaned into the feeling regardless.

Somewhere along the line their trust in her had grown beyond the requirements of their agreement. They'd put their life in the Radiance's control, as she had in them when she made the decision to trust them as a willing vessel. Ghost supposed that the concept of carrying her heart within their own had become more literal as of recent. Not that they minded.

'As am I for yours, Light,' was all they could say back as they returned their focus on the world around them, reaching back for Quirrel's hand so they could pull him along faster. There wasn't any one being they could use in Greenpath to draw in all of the Radiance's missing pieces, but they knew where they could find help.

They just hoped Unn was in a good mood.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the long wait folks, again
quarantine has been hard but i really want to get back to updating regularly again (if only i had a dollar for every time i said that)
I feel pretty okay abt this chapter (maybe its because i love writing radi and ghost talking to each other?) but like. here's hoping thats a good omen for future stuff. until next time!

Chapter 41: The Future of RoaA

Chapter Summary

heyyyyyyyyy guys. so. here's some news (not a chapter sadly)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter End Notes

sooo. super fun news that i definitely havent been sitting on for a while now...

Remaking of an Age (as you know it) is over! It's over. No more updates no more chapters for *this* iteration of RoaA.

To make a long story short, because of this fic's age and various,,things that happened to me during the course of being in the HK fandom, I've lost a lot of love for the ideas I had when I first started. Trying to finish this has been like doing a collab with someone who doesn't exist anymore, i have a lot of conflicting headcanons, and rereading this story makes me feel..... not good.

But. *But!*
I still love Hollow Knight, and while i don't love a lot of aspects of this story i Do like what I tried to do, and I want to actually do that original idea justice but in a way that's more in tune with how I perceive the game's story as of right now, versus three years ago.

so!

Remaking of an Age *will* be getting a remake in /checks calendar/ Less than a week!

NaNoWriMo is right around the corner and I fully plan on at least attempting to get to the goal (50k words) by the end of November, which would bring me to at Least around the same length that this fic is right now. Possibly more! Who knows!

I know a lot of people might not be happy with this decision, especially anyone who might've been reading this since i started this fic over three years ago, but I genuinely

believe this is the best choice for the story instead of what ive currently been doing, which is dragging it through the dirt instead of just letting it die properly and starting anew.

I really hope everyone loves what I've got planned for the reprise of this fic, I'm excited to share a better version of it with you all very soon!

Thank you very much for sticking with me this long.

Chapter 42

Posting this as just a heads up in case anyone might still be subscribed to this work(s). I'm going to be deleting it this month (Friday the 20th). You have about 5 days to download this fic if you're still interested in reading it. You do not have my permission to repost it or share it anywhere public. If you know my social media accounts I am requesting that you also do not message me about reuploading these works in the future. I plan on deleting them from my own collection of writing as well. Thank you.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Come scream at me on tumblr @constellraetion and let me know if you think my stuff is good or Not!!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!